

*Also by Marcel Aymé*

THE TRANSIENT HOUR  
(*Les Chemin des Écoliers*)

THE FABLE AND THE FLESH  
(*La Vouivre*)

THE MIRACULOUS BARBER  
(*Travelingue*)

FANFARE IN BLÉMONT  
(*Uranus*)

THE SECOND FACE  
(*La Belle Image*)

THE HOUSE OF MEN  
(*Maison Basse*)

THE SECRET STREAM  
(*Le Moulin de la Sourdine*)

THE GREEN MARE  
(*La Jument Verte*)

A Play

CLÉBAMEARD

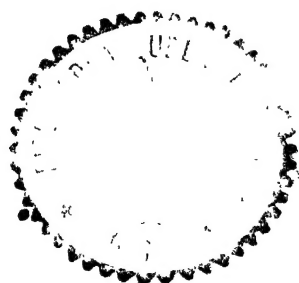
For Children

THE WONDERFUL FARM  
RETURN TO THE WONDERFUL FARM  
(*Les Contes du Chat Perché*)

ACROSS PARIS  
*and other stories*

MARCEL AYMÉ

*Translated from the French  
and with an Introduction by*  
NORMAN DENNY



*The Bodley Head · London.*

*Printed in Great Britain by*  
MORRISON AND GIBB LTD., LONDON AND EDINBURGH  
for THE BODLEY HEAD LIMITED  
10 Earlham Street, London, W.C.2

The following is a list of the volumes of Marcel Aymé's short stories, with their publication dates and the English titles of the stories appearing in this selection:

*Le Puits aux Images*

THE PICTURE-WELL

*Le Nain*

THE DWARF  
A ROLL OF DAUGHTERS

*Derrière Chez Martin*

RUE DE L'ÉVANGILE  
MARTIN THE NOVELIST

*Le Passe-Muraille*

THE SEVEN-LEAGUE BOOTS  
THE WALKER-THROUGH-WALLS  
LEGEND OF POLDFVIA

*Le Vin de Paris*

THE WINE OF PARIS  
THE STATE OF GRACE  
DERMUCHE  
ACROSS PARIS

*En Arrière*





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## 4 Introduction

*Unlike the novel, the collection of short stories is never conceived with an eye to the blurb. Each of its separate pieces represents the idea and mood of a moment, and it is not possible to run up for the use of reviewers a very brief, very weighty summary which will save them the trouble of reading the book.*

THUS MARCEL AYMÉ, in the signed blurb which he ran up ('trouser' is his own word) for the most recent of the six volumes of short stories from which this selection has been made. But although the blurb amounts to an apology for writing short stories at all, since this (says Aymé) is no longer done by the best writers, it does not refer to the biggest hurdle that has to be overcome, the general conviction among publishers that short stories are almost as unsaleable as poetry, besides costing more. It is for this reason that although eight of Aymé's novels, and two volumes of his children's stories, have appeared in English since 1948, his short stories are still almost unknown to English readers.

These sixty-odd stories, a few of which are too long to be called short, amount to only a relatively small part of Marcel Aymé's large literary output, which also includes sixteen novels, at least half a dozen plays, the children's stories and a literary-philosophical diversion entitled *Le Confort Intellectuel*. They may have been overshadowed to some extent by the success of the novels and latterly of the plays. Nevertheless they contain some of the very best of Aymé's work, and I believe it is a good deal owing to them (allowing, of course, for the fact that he happens to be French) that he is so much better understood in France than elsewhere.

The reader who comes to Marcel Aymé simply by way of his novels is apt to find them perplexing if no worse, although it would be hard to maintain that he is unorthodox as a novelist. There is certainly no obscurity in his writing, which indeed is remarkable for its elegant clarity and precision, and never pompous or verbose. He tells a story with great skill, and since his powers of invention seem inexhaustible he always has plenty of story to tell. His characters, eccentric as they often are and enlarged on an almost Dickensian scale, are still decidedly human, seen with a shrewd and sensitive eye, sometimes mocked, sometimes castigated, often treated with a gentleness which lays him open to the charge of sentimentality, always loved, even the most deplorable among them, and never patronised. And through it all there runs a stream of gaiety and sadness, vigour, richness and abundance, an outpouring of life. What more can a novelist offer his readers? Nevertheless for many people the Aymé novels remain bewildering, not to say infuriating. What is the man getting at? What label shall be attached to him? What does he mean? In fact, does he really mean anything at all?

The trouble lies in a particular kind of unorthodoxy. Aymé looks at the world from his own especial viewpoint, of which one characteristic is that it does not recognise the commonly accepted frontier between the real and the unreal. He has pushed the frontier farther back, extending it to encompass not only life as it looks and happens, but life as it is dreamed. Fantasy and everyday reality rub shoulders on his stage, the one as substantial as the other, making their entrance without any preparatory roll of drums or even a dimming of the lights. The portrait of the Green Mare surveys the sexual customs of the villagers of Claquebuc with all the gravity, or nearly all, of a Kinsey; the mythical figure of La Vouivre with her escort of serpents causes turmoil among the people of Vaux-le-Dévès, not by her palpable

physical attractions but (this is where realism enters) by the much more important fact that she possesses a ruby of inestimable price; the prosaic businessman, Raoul Cerusier, in what I hold to be the most prosaic of the novels, methodically sets about accommodating his life to the circumstance that he has been miraculously endowed with a new face. This matter-of-fact juxtaposition of the real and the unreal is at the least puzzling; and unorthodoxy also shows itself in other, less sensational ways. The reader, trustfully embarked on a sedate paragraph in Aymé's 'prim' manner (he has a good many manners) may be suddenly taken aback by a ribald chuckle, as flustering as a belch in a moment of ritual silence. He may be swept abruptly from tenderness to acid irony, from brutality to riotous farce, from sober fact to frank absurdity. In the end it can be seen that these apparent whimsies were really not so whimsical. They are not simply effects, tricks of showmanship designed to startle and amaze. They are nicely calculated, they have their bearing on the matter. And the matter is there, for anyone who will look, propounded by a writer who at times appears almost as severely moralistic as an Old Testament prophet, only less solemn. But having completed the jolting journey through the strangely heightened landscape of an Aymé novel, encountering so many quirks and contradictions, the traveller may find himself a little breathless at the end, morally rumpled, ruffled and bemused.

Readers who resent this kind of treatment, the more literal-minded and those in particular who dislike any fiction that does not put them to sleep, are lost to Aymé. They will not open this book. But others may find in the short stories a kind of simplification that brings him into clearer proportions. Not even Aymé can crowd all his different aspects within the compass of a single short story, although there are times (in *The Wine of Paris*, for instance) when he seems to be doing his best. One mood and one idea, as he says; and

so he may be seen to some extent resolved into his separate parts. But something else emerges from these stories, a common denominator leading to what is possibly the only general statement that can be made about Aymé which does not call for instant qualification. They are all fables. This I believe to be the key to the whole of Aymé's writing, with its very distinctive quality, its paradoxes and apparent contradictions—a fact that is perhaps contradictory in itself. With all his virtuosity, his acute contemporary eye, his wit, sophistication and abounding cleverness, he is a writer of fables in the true sense of the word.

I mean by a fable a story springing from a deeper level than that of the everyday consciousness, at once older and younger, simpler, more candid, and yet more complex; a story that comprehends the marvellous. Whether it also intends, or achieves, any moral purpose is beside the point. With or without moral, these stories are all fables. And I will cite in evidence the one least easily to be reconciled with this contention, the longest and last, which lends its title to the book.

*Across Paris* belongs to a particularly vigorous and productive period in Aymé's working life, the period immediately following the liberation of France. The war scattered French writers all ways. There were some, such as Vercors with *Les Editions de Minuit* and Claude Morgan with *Les Lettres Françaises*, who turned to active resistance, publishing their own clandestine works and those of other writers (Jean Paulhan, Elsa Triolet, Jean Cassou, Mauriac, Éluard, Aragon and Sartre among them) under the nose of the Gestapo. There were other French writers who conducted themselves in a manner very much more agreeable to the Occupying Power, and yet others who managed to get abroad or who gave up writing altogether. Aymé did none of these things. He simply wrote tales, such as *The Second Face* ('La Belle Image', Paris 1941) and *The Fable and the Flesh* ('La Vouivre',

Paris 1943) which had nothing to do with war or politics. But although he continued to live quietly and unobtrusively on the upper slopes of Montmartre, he did so with eyes wide open. He is not merely fooling, he is indeed being perfectly serious, when he says in *The Wine of Paris*, 'There are certain lateral trends which have started all kinds of contemporary gimmicks fizzing at the back of my head. I simply haven't the heart to write about sun-bathed terraces and merry little wines.' A great deal of fizzing went on, and when at last the lid was lifted it came bubbling out—*The Transient Hour* ('Le Chemin des Écoliers', Paris 1946), *Across Paris*, which appeared in the volume of stories published in 1947, *Fanfare in Blémont* ('Uranus', Paris 1948) and 'Le Confort Intellectuel' (1949), a remarkable and brilliant work which must, however, be read in French.

All these, the outcome of much brooding over the hideous moral problems by which all Frenchmen had been assailed, reveal a changed Aymé, forthright and often savage, less airy altogether in his treatment of the contemporary scene than the urbane satirist who wrote *The Miraculous Barber* ('Travelingue') just before the war. *Across Paris*, one of the best stories he has written, is characteristic of that period, and uncharacteristic of Aymé as a whole, inasmuch as it contains almost no fantasy or overt humour. It is 'straight' fiction, extravagant but firmly bedded in reality, that leaves no doubt as to what it is driving at. It is a morality in the guise of a thriller. But the fabulous quality is there from the start, in the queer opening scene in the cellar, in the dark streets, in the mystifying and at moments towering figure of Grandgil. It is a tale pervaded with the sense of marvels; and meticulously concerned though it is with the circumstances of a particular time, it yet contrives to be outside it.

The sense of marvels is, of course, nothing but the sense of life, and that is Aymé's only secret. The life which he sees and cherishes is too rich and spacious, too miraculous even



at its worst, to be pared and watered down to fit within the bounds of a conventional realism. It cannot be photographed. Yet there is no more skilful photographer. Any reader who has been induced by these remarks to start with the last story in this collection might do worse than follow it up with the first, *Rue de l'Évangile*, of which the setting is so brilliantly evoked. I have put this one first not only because of my especial liking for it but because it is so uniquely an Aymé story, the very essence, such as only he could have written. The richness amid squalor is what matters. The richness is *always* what matters to Aymé, the vigour and abundance of life, ugly and brutal as it may be; the innocence and cunning of simple people (without cunning how would they survive; and what finally matters except that they should survive?) and the love and the laughter.

The love of simple people, and the laughter. The laughter above all. A reviewer in a refined English weekly, who took a sturdy dislike to *The Green Mare*, surmised that it was Aymé's ambition 'to humanise the snigger'. The remark, whatever it means, is only worth quoting because it is so grossly wrong. If there is any sniggering to be found in the English version of Aymé's works his translator must accept the blame, although I might argue that there are things which, translated into English, are not easily divorced from the snigger. Aymé for his part might ask why in the world he should snigger, or want anyone else to snigger, over things at which the French are accustomed to laugh unashamedly and without caring if the joke is as old as the first joker. Aymé does not snigger. He laughs, loudly or silently as the case may be (in private, always silently), unexpectedly, outrageously, seldom cruelly and never viciously, but always, I think, with affection for the thing he laughs at, even when he hates it, simply because it has made him laugh. His laughter may shock and sometimes hurt, but it does not smear. When he laughs at the Church, as he often does, it is sophistry

and formal morality he is laughing at, not simple faith. He laughs as Rabelais laughed, at the same things and for the same reasons.

And since at last the name of Rabelais has crept into this note, because it would not be kept out, and since Aymé is so clearly in the line of his successors, I may quote Rabelais' own affirmation:

*Mieux est de ris que de larmes escrire  
Pour ce que rire est le propre de l'homme.*

And proper to Marcel Aymé, who would, I am sure, never claim for his writings that they are designed to instruct or improve or to solve any problems. They are designed to serve life, to help with the business of living, and that is all.

NORMAN DENNY



## *Rue de l'Évangile*

IN THE La Chapelle district of Paris there lived a poor Arab called Abdel for short, and also called 'l'Arbi' or 'Bique-muche' or even 'Bique à poux', that is to say, 'Flea-ridden goat' or 'Fleabag', because he had fleas.

The northern part of the La Chapelle quarter is enclosed within bare walls concealing factories, goods stations, railway lines, gasometers, grimy trains and wandering locomotives. The smoke of the eastern and northern railway systems, mingling with that of the factories, blackens apartment houses built with an eye to economy, and the sparsely frequented streets have the aspect of a drab corner of the provinces surrounded by a desert of rust and coal. It is, in short, a literary landscape where the sensitive pedestrian, hearing the trains whistle in the murk, may find himself murmuring a prayer to God that life shall not last unduly long.

In the Rue des Roses, at the end of a blind alley separating two black and dingy houses, Abdel lived on a flight of three damp stone steps leading to a door in a wall, sheltered by a screen of rotting wood. Neighbours returning home late at night sometimes went to the end of the alleyway, and by the flame of a cigarette-lighter inspected him as he lay asleep wrapped in the old military cape that was his day- and night-time garment. Those more inspired prodded him with their foot, saying, 'Wah, wah, shoo shoo', perhaps with a friendly notion of bringing themselves within his comprehension. He replied with the little, hoarse, shrill cry that seems to form the basis of the Arab tongue and they went away content.

In the morning, at the first sound of dirty water splashing over the cobbles of the alley, Abdel arose, took off his cape

and put it on again. Having thus completed his toilet he strolled along the Rue des Roses looking for what life might bring. The early housewives, hurrying to get their shopping done before they went to the factory, gazed at him with disfavour and were not slow to pass unkind remarks. After gleaning a few edible fragments from the dustbins he was accustomed to make a long pause outside the Café du Destin, where he watched the men breakfasting at the counter on coffee or a glass of white wine. The customers would wag their heads in his direction saying to one another, 'There's the Arab again', astonished and slightly put out to find that he was still alive when so many honest men, of value to their families and the Republic, daily departed this world. Sometimes M. Alceste, the proprietor of the Destin, would tap on the window with a coin, calling upon him to enter. 'I'll show you something you wouldn't believe,' he would say to the customers. He would fill a large cup with vinegar, and holding up a franc would complete the bargain with Abdel by nodding his head. Abdel never hesitated, but swallowed the vinegar at a gulp. 'Any decent man would die of it,' the *patron* would say after the onlookers had exclaimed in amazement, and he nearly always added, 'It's interesting from a scientific point of view.' Mme Alceste, his wife, who took no interest in scientific phenomena, and saw nothing in the performance but a waste of money and vinegar, would stand aloof behind the counter, shrugging her shoulders. She was a short, plump woman, still young, with a large bosom thrusting very low beneath a corsage of brightly coloured silk. A shade of dark moustache lent her puffy face a hint of impassioned mystery.

On the days when he was not invited to drink vinegar Abdel had another chance of being admitted to the Destin. During the slack period after the factory workers had left his counter, M. Alceste, while sweeping the floor, was sometimes visited by an oppressive sense of the vanity of

human affairs and, glancing through the window, would see the world as an arid pavement on which Abdel constituted an interesting blot. He would open the door and say, 'Arab, bring in your fleas'. Mme. Alceste, seated at the far end of the room, would again shrug her shoulders, but without taking her nose out of her film-magazine or ceasing to dream that she was Mae West or, on her more sanguine days, Greta Garbo. Leaning on his broom-handle her husband would gaze at Abdel as he drank a cup of luke-warm coffee, and fall into spoken meditation.

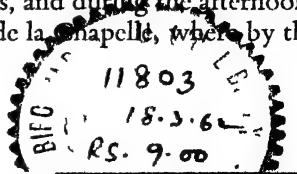
'When you come to think of it,' he would say, 'men don't amount to much. Take yourself, for instance. What are you? Muck, that's all you are. Where do you come from? God knows. What use are you to anyone? I was having a talk with the barber the other day and what we both said was that the Government oughtn't to allow riff-raff like you into the country, and still less into a town like Paris, which is the heart of France. Not that I've anything against foreigners, generally speaking, but you've got to draw the line somewhere. And suppose you were to disappear one day, shot or something—who'd even know about it? No one. Maybe I'd happen to remark to Mme Alceste, "It's a funny thing, we haven't seen that Arab around lately, the one that drinks vinegar." And that's all. In a fortnight I'd have forgotten all about you. So that proves you're less than nothing.'

While these remarks were being addressed to him, Abdel would stand gazing at Mme Alceste with eyes alight with passion, sorry that he had no chance to rape her, because, being humble and modest, the thought that he might achieve anything by making up to her never entered his head. At night, on his three damp steps, he often dreamed of her as of a voluptuous pillow, warming and softening his couch of stone, and his nearest neighbours would sometimes hear a soft murmur issue from his sleep. But his happiest dreams did not prompt him to ask more of life, and in those moments

when he devoured Mme Alceste with his eyes he never expected her to give him a glance in return. Only he was a little jealous of the fabulous figures he sometimes glimpsed on the pages of her film magazine, which seemed to transport the *patronne* to a sphere even more remote from him than that of the Café du Destin.

Upon leaving the café Abdel was in the habit of going to the little Place Hébert, where he made another extensive pause. From the pavement at the corner of the Rue des Roses he would stand looking over the crossroads towards a street which was often completely deserted, the Rue de l'Évangile, which ran between tall, blank walls screening the railway cutting on the right and, on the left, the vast gasometer area, of which the tall and monstrous containers seemed to over-shadow and crush the roadway. This long, enclosed street, without houses or pedestrians, filled Abdel with alarm and curiosity. On several occasions he had started to go along it, but, overtaken with panic and feeling the world slip away from him, he had had to turn back. About a hundred yards from the Place Hébert it veered a little to the right, seeming to continue endlessly between its unbroken walls until it became lost within itself. In the grey and smoky light of the morning it was like a street in abstract, like the starting-place of a frowning infinity or of a desolate passageway leading to unattainable heavens. Abdel concluded that for practical purposes it led nowhere, and whenever he saw a lorry emerge from it on to the Place Hébert he wished he knew enough of the language to be able to stop the driver and ask him, 'Where have you come from?'

Throughout the day, as he strayed about the quarter, Abdel dreamed of the *patronne* of the Café du Destin and the emptiness of the Rue de l'Évangile. During the mornings in the market in the Rue Guadeloupe, where he kept a look-out for anything edible, and for furs, and during the afternoons on the benches of the Boulevard de la Chapelle, when by the



light of the shop-windows he watched the passing of ten-franc trollops with a tiring sense of having penetrated into a forbidden garden, the same pictures returned to haunt him; and at night, as he fell asleep, he seemed to see the tightly encased figure of Mme Alceste melting into the shadows of an empty and perilous street.

On a certain Sunday morning, while her husband swept the floor of the Café du Destin, Mme Alceste sat reading the story of a particularly stirring film. The hero was a young man of striking good looks, enlisted in the Foreign Legion, who bore a romantic design tattooed on his chest. Although disapproved of by his platoon-sergeant, he fought like a lion in battle and at other times had a light of wistful yearning in his eyes which was deeply moving to members of the other sex. The wife of a world-famous naturalist, who had come to Africa to study the habits of the locust, fell in love with the humble soldier and their passion was consummated in the scented evenings. Finally the young man died a heroic death in the desert after saving the naturalist's life, and the lady climbed on to the roof of a Moorish house to sing a heart-rending lament to the stars. The title of the film was, 'My Legionary'. Mme Alceste, damp-eyed, her bosom heaving with love and heroism, did not hear her husband call to Abdel through the half-open door. She was rapt in contemplation of the picture of the hero who, emaciated and threadbare, dust-caked, sweat-soaked but alight with passion, rushed fearlessly into mortal peril at the end of the long, thirsty day's march. And there stirred in her a faint sense of resentment and regret at the thought that the café-keeper, her husband, would never go to Africa to study locusts. Young and unassuaged though she still was, she must for ever forgo the burning sands, the untrammelled love, the splendid ecstasies of suffering and remorse. Yet she felt that



she had it in her, as much as any woman, to kindle the ardours of a soldier of mystery and hymn his death in impassioned couplets

Abdel stood drinking his cup of coffee while M Alceste explained to him the various classifications into which he would separate the human race were he God instead of being a café-proprietor. Omnipotence would not cause him to be any more indulgent towards Abdel, whom without hesitation he assigned to the lowest category

'The fact of having a personal acquaintance with you, in a manner of speaking, wouldn't make any difference to me if I was God I know only too well what you're like to think for an instant——'

Suddenly M Alceste broke off Craning his neck he peered with a new intentness at this lowest form of human life, then stiffened in outraged astonishment and cried

'Madame Alceste, have you noticed the way this animal looks at you? Have you seen the expression on his face?'

The words, which meant no more to him than the ones which had preceded them, did not cause Abdel to look elsewhere Glancing up, Mme Alceste encountered that ravening gaze and her heart beat faster As he leaned against the bar in his tattered army cape, with his brown dirty face, Abdel appeared to her like a soldier, tanned by African suns, who bears beneath the folds of his sullied uniform the glorious scars of battle She seemed to be seeing in the flesh the heroic figure of her story, and in the depths of those hotly glowing eyes she read the savage male desire which only that instant she had been craving

'Filthy swine!' cried her husband 'So this is how you repay hospitality! Put that cup down at once!'

His threatening expression and the sound of his voice made it clear to Abdel that he had done something wrong, and putting down the cup he turned hastily towards the door. Mme Alceste had risen to her feet, her face pale and her hands

pressed to her bosom, but a lingering sense of the domestic realities restrained her from intervening in response to the impulse of passion. Her husband was waving his broom at Abdel as he drove him out.

'I'll teach you to look at a lady like that! Get out, you dirty brute, and don't ever put your nose in here again!'

Torn with emotion though she was, Mme Alceste could not bring herself to utter a sound. Only when she saw Abdel's figure pass the window as he vanished along the Rue des Roses did she murmur beneath her breath:

'My Legionary . . .'

Abdel went towards the Place Hébert pondering in perplexity over the sudden change in M. Alceste and having no notion what had brought it about. He was conscious of having behaved towards his host and hostess precisely as he always did, and no suspicion entered his head that his persistence in staring at Mme Alceste might have been the cause of her husband's fury. His desire for a woman so remote seemed to him too utterly vain a thing, too deeply buried in the depths of his humility, to attract the notice of those great ones of the Destin. And Mme Alceste's perturbation, even had it been more markedly displayed, would no less certainly have escaped him. There was in any case a simple explanation of his downfall, namely that he had ceased to please, and reason were less important to him than consequences. The ban which had been placed on him entailed an upheaval in his daily habits which he viewed with great distress. It meant the end of those long periods of lounging outside M. Alceste's establishment, and of coffees drunk at the counter while over the rim of his cup he contemplated the pillowed shape of the *patronne*. His visits to the Destin had furnished matter for most of his dreaming during the long days which he passed in passing the time, and on the rare occasions when he ventured to contemplate the future, it was always in some

sort of relationship with the Alcestes and their establishment that he envisaged his tomorrows.

When he came to the Place he stopped as usual and spent a moment reviewing the situation. It seemed to him that his life had been suddenly emptied of its content. He had no desire to wander at random, as he did on other days.

The neighbourhood oppressed him. Ordinarily he strayed about it rather as though everything in it came within the domain of the Destin. When he stole a fruit or a tin of food from a market-stall he felt himself protected by the distant presence of M. Alceste.

Looking up he gazed along the perspective of the Rue de l'Évangile, whose nakedness was veiled by a mist dirtied with smoke. It lay before him like a roadway to forgetfulness. He was tempted to enter it and, turning his back for ever upon the La Chapelle district, set out upon the discovery of new worlds. He walked round the Place and paused at the entrance to the street. An empty and silent corridor lay before him, implacably enclosed within tall grey walls, secret in its depths. Behind him he could hear the warm sounds of life, the movement of the quiet crossroads. Men went laughing into a café on the Place, and he seemed to catch the scent of sawdust and vermouth. A soft nostalgia kept him motionless midway between the pavements. But a feeling of lassitude prevented him from essaying the unknown. For an instant he stared, hesitating, at the blue nameplate of the street, then he turned and went towards the market.

He walked fast, as though a perilous temptation dogged his heels, but by degrees the return of his daily preoccupations calmed him. Upon entering the covered market he had a stroke of luck. Almost at once he saw a wretchedly clad woman with a new-born child in her arms. In order to free her hand to smack another child, which clung wailing to her skirts, she put down her purse and shopping-bag on a pile of

empty cases beside her. Abdel was impervious to pity and preferred to rob the poor, knowing by experience that the well-fed are dangerous in their reactions. He seized the purse, slipped it quietly into a pocket of his cape and gained the exit without being observed. Walking sedately along the Rue Pajol towards the Boulevard de la Chapelle he counted the money in the purse, which came to about ten francs. At the moment he was neither hungry nor thirsty and wished for nothing except to rest and escape his sense of frustration. After drifting uncertainly for a little while along the boulevard he entered a cheap-looking café. Half-a-dozen young men, regular Sunday customers, were seated round a table drinking and talking bicycles. Installed in the window a woman with platinum hair, past her first youth, was smiling at the strollers in the street. She also smiled from time to time at the young men in the café, but from no sordid motive, rather with a sort of servile amiability.

The *patron* greeted Abdel with a cold stare. The entrance of a figure so disreputable, on a Sunday morning, did no credit to his establishment. Abdel did not venture to sit down but went and stood at the counter. A serving-girl asked him suspiciously what he wanted. He displayed his money in the hollow of his hand but could not answer her questions except with brief vocal sounds, at once hoarse and shrill. The *patron* observed these proceedings with a marked disapproval.

'That'll do. Give him a coffee and then he can clear out,' he said, speaking loudly in order to convey to the other customers that intrusions of this sort were not usual. And he added: 'A blackbird if ever there was one!'

The platinum blonde laughed, glancing at the young men. They paused in their conversation to stare at Abdel, not with malice but because his military cape amused them. Sensing more laughter on the way, Abdel had already begun to think of leaving, without even drinking his coffee. One of the young men got up, walked round him with an air of

exaggerated admiration and said, pointing to the tattered, greasy garment:

'Please, sir, will you let me have the gent's natty suiting when it gets a bit worn?'

This occasioned a great burst of merriment. The blonde left her post of observation and came to the counter to ask Abdel the address of his tailor. The question was drowned by the laughter and loud voices of the others, much to her vexation. She dodged in front of Abdel as he made for the door, looking for another chance to score this triumph of wit. He tried to go round her, bumped into her unintentionally and trod on her toe. Thereupon she abused him in a furious voice, calling him scum and muck and a dirty black bastard, and followed him out into the street with further invective, telling him among other things that he was flea-ridden and rotted with shameful maladies. The passers-by paused, the better to behold the man who had drawn upon himself these cruel truths. But what troubled Abdel far more than the abuse, of which he could understand nothing except the intention, was the fact that there were two Arabs among the onlookers. These were decently and almost elegantly clad, and were accompanied by two women of the quarter who were doubtless their wives, since one held a little dark-skinned, curly-haired girl by the hand. They gazed at him in silent and aloof rebuke, with more harshness than derision in their eyes. Abdel now bitterly regretted having paused on the threshold of the Rue de l'Évangile. He wanted only to escape from a decidedly hostile world.

He had gone two hundred yards along the Rue de l'Évangile and had passed the bend, so that he could no longer see the tall gasometers which from a distance seemed to dominate the landscape. The street, vanishing into mist, was reduced to nothing but its bare walls. Never in his

previous attempts to explore it had he ventured so far, although on week-days there were passing lorries which brought with them a comforting sense of human companionship, however fleeting. But on a Sunday the street was dead, without a soul. It bore no impress of the life of man, and its tangible aspect, the stark walls and pavements, was so purely geometrical that all human context was lacking. Occasionally Abdel heard the whistle of a locomotive, like the cry of a bird over an autumn countryside. With every step he took he felt the town and the world slip farther away from him. The district of La Chapelle had become no more than a wavering image in his consciousness. His memories grew pale and were blotted out, patches of shadow were submerging even his most recent past. He tried to concentrate on the destination towards which he was moving, but he lacked the power to imagine it, even confusedly. His points of contact with life were steadily growing fewer. The very name of the street, which he had never been able to decipher on the blue plate, was unknown to him. He seemed to be nowhere, to be drifting in emptiness. Giddiness overtook him. He looked upwards to escape the oppression of the walls, but the sky was low and pressed down on him like a ceiling.

He came finally to a standstill in the middle of the street and stood staring at his cape and his feet in order to recover the sense of his own identity. The sight of his feet comforted him. One of his big toes protruded from a hole in his boot, and he amused himself by wiggling it. It was like meeting an old friend. He seemed to discover all the sweetness of life in the free movement of that toe, blackened with mud. A flash of memory returned to him. The game with his toe recalled a nightmare with which his slumbers were sometimes afflicted, and which was not dissimilar from the one he was living at that moment. In this dream he was borne off into the solitude of an inhuman chaos where formless mountains weighed upon him on all sides: and when he started into wakefulness the

hard and greasy contact of his three stone steps filled him with an inexpressible joy, as though happiness were a thing born at the very confines of life, which earthly chances could enhance or diminish in detail but no more.

He wearied at length of his toes and returned to his state of disquiet. His courage had departed, his head was heavy and his legs weak. Before walking on he glanced over his shoulder and saw that mist had closed the street behind him. Undecided whether to turn back or go forward, he made several half-turns and ended by losing his sense of direction. The street was the same whichever way he looked, enclosed within high walls and ending in a mist. Alarmed and now resolved to turn back, he looked to right and left without being able to decide which way to go. Finally, persuading himself that he knew, he turned right and set off briskly. But then he began to doubt and came running back. He continued to go to and fro in this fashion for some minutes, always at a run and in growing terror at the thought of losing himself in the unknown. Fatigue and the fear of going still further astray brought him finally to a stop. He began to wonder anxiously how long he had been wandering up and down the Rue de l'Évangile, and he found that he had no idea. The sense of time itself was slipping away from him, and he feared lest he should be forgotten by life. Death appeared to him in the form of a blind, eternal hesitation between two directions. He began to examine the walls, looking for some human token to which he might pin his consciousness. Afraid of going too far he moved slowly, like a captive exploring his prison. And when he crossed the street to examine the opposite wall he experienced a shock of intense delight. Directly in front of him, traced carefully with a lump of coal on the plaster, was a legend in large capital letters—"To the gallows with Casimir!" Abdel could not read, but the sense of the words would in any event have added nothing to his rapture. The message, meaningless

though it was, was none the less a message from the living world. He could not take his eyes off it. Behind the tall black letters the entire universe again came into being. Through Casimir he saw the whole district of La Chapelle, the grey, faded streets, the provincial market, the drab little shops and damp caf  s. The Destin stood out with an especial clarity, and the countenance of Mme Alceste, wrapped in mystery, hung dreaming in the frame of a capital letter. Older memories still were gradually reborn to him, of the sunlit lards, of his parents, of flocks and tillage and brightly coloured towns, and of dark towns and a prison and forgotten friends.

His confidence momentarily restored by these evocations he looked round for other inscriptions, more defined in their eloquence, which might enable him to recover his sense of direction, but his search was conducted in a haphazard fashion, so that before long he had lost sight of the four words written with coal. Alarmed at being unable to find them he began to turn in circles and then to run from one side of the street to the other. Finally chance again brought him to the black letters and after this he did not leave them. Squatting at the foot of the wall he gazed inquiringly up at the magic formula, staring so intently at it that each group of letters became invested with a character of its own. But it was the word Casimir which pleased him most: a subtle charm emanated from that inscrutable array of hieroglyphics, lulling his anxieties to rest.

The approaching sound of an engine caused him to start to his feet. As he arose a car emerged from the mist at his right hand. It was travelling fast. Abdel ran off the pavement, shouting and gesticulating. Either because he was afraid of running down a madman, or because he thought he was being warned of some danger, the driver slowed, pulling up a few yards away, and with a movement of his head inquired what he wanted. Abdel's action had been quite spontaneous. He



had had no time to think of anything to say, and in any case the conversation would have been difficult. In his confusion he pointed to the legend on the wall. Apparently indifferent to this sort of message, the driver shrugged his shoulders and let in his clutch. For an instant Abdel stayed motionless, then he ran shouting after the car with a vague notion that he would reach safety by keeping behind it.

For about twenty yards he almost succeeded in maintaining contact, sputing as the car gathered speed. The distance between them rapidly increased, and before long the car had vanished in the mist. But Abdel did not abandon the pursuit. He could still hear the hum of the engine, almost as reassuring as its visible presence. With his head down and his teeth clenched, he ran blindly, straining towards an objective which he did not even attempt to picture. At last his breath failed him and he stopped. A variety of sounds reached his ears. He thought he stood on the threshold of an unknown city, and then found that he was back at the little Place Hébert. Two women whom he remembered noticing as he passed that way were still gossiping in the doorway of a lodging-house. His journey down the Rue de l'Évangile had lasted a little less than a quarter of an hour.

That night Abdel returned with feelings of warmth and gratitude to his three stone steps in the alleyway off the Rue des Roses. So joyfully did he count his blessings that he was slow to fall asleep, and as he was in the act of doing so he caught a faint sound of approaching footsteps. Someone came down the stairway and a foot bumped against his knee. He raised himself on one elbow. Night lay thickly over the alley, and thicker still in his own small nook. A feminine form, supple and rounded, bent over him. Nervous hands, rendered clumsy by impatience, sought the buttons of his cap. He was afraid to move. The woman pressed her body

to his, slipping a hand under his shirt, and with her lips against his ear murmured in a low voice, 'My Legionary!' She repeated the words a number of times, with a stubborn pertinacity, like a person hammering in nails—'My Legionary!' Abdel held his breath. All the sweetness of the rediscovered town descended that night upon his bed of stone.

Half an hour later the woman rose, repeating in a voice of greater languor the same mysterious words. Abdel sought to discern the outline of her figure as she hurried away over the cobbles of the alley, but the night was too dark. He lay down again and at once fell into a deep sleep.

Upon awaking in the morning, huddled beneath his cape, he pondered for a long time over his visitor. Since he knew no women other than Mme Alceste, it was of her whom he first thought. The notion that she should have come to him seemed absurd, nevertheless he found it both agreeable and convenient to endow the unknown with the aspect of the woman he had desired. When he left the alley he avoided passing in front of the Café du Destin, partly on account of his quarrel with M. Alceste, but principally from fear of affronting his good fortune. The recollection of the night was sufficient for the day's dreaming. Through the streets of the La Chapelle quarter he pursued the face of love in a state of happy perturbation, without effort finding in it the likeness of Mme Alceste. As night fell his fear grew keener lest the beloved should not come again.

He returned to his lair as usual at nine o'clock. It occurred to him that he might keep watch at the end of the alley, but an obscure sense of the courtesy owing to an apparition deterred him from doing so. The unknown arrived punctually at a quarter to ten. She carried a rug this time which she spread over the stone, and which, moreover, she took away with her when she departed. Then love-making was like that of the previous night, and on this night too Abdel fell

asleep without having seen his mistress's face. Nor did he any longer wish to see it, greatly preferring the vision of Mme Alceste.

On the third evening the unknown was again punctual but more summary in her gestures and somewhat irritable in her manner. No longer did she press her lips to Abdel's ear to murmur, 'My Legionary!', but confined her remarks to terse words of command. He was troubled by this, and he feared for the future. In the morning he awoke later than usual. As he emerged from the alleyway he saw M. Alceste, broom in hand, meditating in the doorway of the Destin, and he turned and went in the opposite direction. . . .

M. Alceste had noticed Abdel. He stared after him for a moment, then spat in the road and re-entered the café. Mme Alceste was reading the latest issue of her film magazine and a flush rose on her cheeks as she did so. The story she was now reading was enacted in the fashionable world. The son of a wealthy industrialist was playing tennis with a parentless girl of unimpeachable connections. They were married at the church of Saint-Philippe-du-Roule after a series of high-minded misunderstandings which bore witness to the delicacy of their sentiments and the elegance of their wardrobes.

M. Alceste began shifting bottles in order to wipe a section of the counter. He stopped suddenly, put down his cloth and started to scratch his head with both hands. Glancing at his wife as he did so, he remarked:

'So you're having to scratch too?' "

Mme Alceste looked up from her magazine with one hand to her head, blushed violently and replied:

'Yes. I don't know why.'

'My head's been itching for the last two days,' said M. Alceste, 'and this morning I feel as though I was being eaten alive. I couldn't say anything at the time, but just now, when I was serving the customers, I distinctly saw a flea on the

counter. Luckily no one else noticed it, but upon my word. . . .

For the next minute the pair scratched freely, abandoning concealment.

'I saw that Arab go past just now,' said M. Alceste, 'in that cape of his. I wonder if it's he who——'

'Just what I was going to say,' said Mme Alceste.

'He was here Sunday morning, if you remember. I was fool enough to call him in.'

'I said all along he shouldn't be allowed in here. You see, I was right.'

'It's quite true, and I ought to have had more sense. But apart from that, the Government didn't ought to allow those sort of creatures in the quarter. I've said so many a time.'

'Ah,' said Mme Alceste. 'We aren't properly protected.'

Both continued to scratch while she gazed raptly at the picture in her film magazine, of a glossy young gentleman in a dinner-jacket. Looking up she said:

'Why don't you speak to M. Ernest about it?'

'That's an idea. I'll try and catch him this afternoon.'

The two police inspectors entered the alleyway in the early hours of the morning. One was a young man wearing a soft felt hat over his ear and a raincoat of which the belt was fastened with a studied negligence. The other, M. Ernest, was more in the classic mould. Thick-set and moustached, with a butcher's shoulders and huge calves filling out his trouser-legs, he wore a bowler hat and a black overcoat of civil-service cut.

Abdel, who had passed a restless night vainly awaiting the coming of the unknown, was still slumbering on his three steps. M. Ernest shone an electric torch and for a moment stood scrutinising the heap of tattered clothing with an experienced eye.

'Look at him,' he said. 'When I tell Pondeur about this he won't believe me.'

He prodded the sleeper with his foot, shouting to him to get up. Scarcely taking time to stretch his body, Abdel sprang out of his lair. Despite the darkness, which prevented him from seeing the faces of his visitors, he guessed at once with whom he had to deal. M. Ernest examined him carefully by the light of the torch and said with distaste:

'Gutter sweepings. . . . Arab muck. . . . It's more like a job for the lost dogs department than for us.'

As Abdel started to utter high-pitched sounds of protest he prodded him with a disgusted finger and said:

'Pipe down, my beauty. You can say it all when we get you to the station.'

Abdel fell resignedly into step with the younger man. As they left the alleyway he glanced towards the Café du Destin. Customers were standing in the doorway. M. Alceste watched him go by with an air of sympathy that was only slightly mocking. Mme Alceste wore a stern countenance.

His head drooping, his lids still heavy with sleep, Abdel passed on between his escorts, paying no attention to the familiar spectacle of the Rue des Roses. His present trouble caused him no more than a vague anxiety mingled with the lingering sorrow of the night and the fatigue due to loss of sleep. The two police officers chatted casually about their duties and their colleagues, almost forgetting him. The routine business of taking a vagrant into custody was too trifling to be of interest.

At that hour the Rue de l'Évangile was still empty and silent. No lorries passed along it. As they came to the Place Hébert, Abdel looked automatically towards it. Eddies of mist hung over the paving stones, making a soft pathway between the stark grey walls. At the bend the lofty gisometers, like huge, armoured fortresses, seemed to keep watch over the silence. Abdel took a step backwards and darted across

the Place in the conviction that once he had reached the Rue de l'Évangile, cut off from the town and the whole world, no one would ever catch him. But the policemen overtook him within a few yards of sanctuary. He surrendered without resistance, and M. Ernest said, threatening him with the back of his big, hairy hand:

'That's enough of that!'

Two railway workers passed them on their way to the Rue des Roses, and one said, laughing, to the other:

'Look, the Fleabag's going off on holiday!'

As they turned into the Rue Pajol, Abdel gave a last glance behind him, making a movement with his shoulders as though he still had some notion of taking to his heels. With a surprising nimbleness in one of his age and corpulence, M. Ernest booted the back of his cape, delivering two powerful, shrewdly directed kicks that drew from him a grunt of pain. An old woman walking her dog on the pavement made a gesture of pity and protest.

'That's how you have to treat this kind of animal,' the inspector said to her. 'It's the only thing they understand.'

## *The Wine of Paris*

IN A village in the Arbois country there lived a wine-grower named Félicien Guérillot who did not like wine. Yet he came of sound stock. His father and his grandfather, also wine-growers, had both been carried off by cirrhosis of the liver at the age of fifty or thereabouts, and none of his forebears on his mother's side had ever done injustice to a bottle. This strange and shameful weakness weighed heavily upon Félicien. He grew the best wines in the district, besides possessing the best cellar. Léontine Guérillot, his wife, was a woman of a gentle and submissive nature, neither prettier nor better shaped than is desirable for the peace of mind of an honest man. Félicien would have been the happiest of wine-growers had he not had an aversion for wine that appeared to be insurmountable. Vainly had he striven with the utmost zeal and resolution to overcome the failing. Vainly had he tested all vintages in the hope of finding one that would yield him the key to the unknown paradise. Besides sampling all the wines of Burgundy and Bordeaux, those of the Loire and the Rhône, and the champagnes and the wines of Alsace, and the straw-coloured wines, and red, white and rosé, and Algerian wines and the roughest and thinnest of table-wines, he had not neglected the Rhine wines, or the Tokays, or the wines of Spain and Italy, Cyprus and Portugal. But each of his experiments had ended in disillusion. With every wine it was the same as with that of his own country. Even in the driest, thirstiest season of the year he could not swallow a mouthful without having the sensation, horrible to relate, of gulping down cod-liver oil. •

Léontine alone knew her husband's dreadful secret and

helped him to conceal it. Félicien could never have brought himself to admit in public that he did not like wine. It would have been as bad as to say that he did not like his own children, even worse, for it may happen anywhere that a father comes to detest his son, but there has never been anyone in the Arbois country who did not like wine. Such a thing is Heaven's retribution for who shall say what sin, an aberration on the part of Nature, a monstrous deformity that any right-thinking and well-drinking man will refuse to contemplate. One may dislike carrots, spinach, beetroot or the skin on hot milk. But not wine. It is like hating the air one breathes, since each is equally indispensable. So it was not from any foolish sense of pride, but out of respect for human dignity, that Félicien Guérillot . . .

Well, now, there is a story about wine that seemed to be starting quite nicely. But it has suddenly begun to weary me. It does not belong to the age we live in, and I feel uncomfortable with it. Besides which, I am too old for cod-liver oil. So I shall drop that story, although all kinds of things might have happened to Félicien, amusing, cruel, stirring and pathetic. I can see him, for example, simulating a slight alcoholic tremor in order to mislead his neighbours, all of whom, deceived and at the same time amazed, would be filled with esteem for him, and one would say to the others, speaking for all:

'Do you see that? Here's Félicien getting the shakes already, and not yet thirty, taking after his father, Achille Guérillot, now there was a drinker for you! You remember him, eh, Achille Guérillot? He wasn't a one to suck acid-drops as plenty of us know, but never drunk, mind, always under control—a real wine-grower, in fact, a real drinker, a real man. Yes, that was his father, Achille Guérillot, a proper drinker, no denying it, what I call a real drinker, or a real man if you'd rather put it that way. And do you remember how father Guérillot—Achille, I mean, I'm not going back to the



old man, Guérillot Auguste, although mark you he was a good drinker too, but it's Achille I'm talking about, Guérillot Achille, who's been dead these fifteen years, come to think of it, that very hot year, the year the fleas were hopping about on people the way they do on cattle—but it was, I tell you, it was the year the girl Claudette got the gendarmes drunk the time they came here about that business of Panouillot's mare. And talking of Jules Panouillot, there was another drinker who could have shown them a thing or two if he was alive today. Why, him and Achille, they were like brothers, and they got up to some capers together, I can tell you. There was the time they dressed up as devils to scare the curé's maid-servant. But if I was to start on that story now I'd have you laughing till you choked and it'd cost you a bottle apiece. To come back to father Guérillot (Achille), it's not hard to reckon how old he was when he started getting the shakes because he was born two days after my own father, and I know that because they were conscripted together, I remember my father telling us one day when we were chatting about one thing and another the way we are today, but mark you that was ten years ago. Yes, it must be at least ten years because my great-uncle, Glod'Pierre, was still alive, he'd come from Aiglepierre to visit us in Tantiet-le-jambe's pony-trap (there was another solid drinker for you and after the skirts in a flash), well, it was all of ten years ago and maybe eleven, ten or eleven it doesn't matter which, it's only the facts that matter. So there were the three of us you see, me and my father and my great-uncle and a bottle on the table—oh, nothing special in the way of a bottle, just a little wine that I remember my old man used to make out of a corner of the vineyard that sometimes yielded and sometimes didn't, but a nice little wine all the same, fresh and round, with a taste of the pebbles on the Labbé slope. Well, there we were, chatting about this and that, anything that came into our heads, and all of a sudden my Uncle Glod'Pierre—I call him

my uncle, but he was my great-uncle really—my Uncle Glod’Pierre, he said, “And what’s become of that fellow you did your service with, what was his name?” (My uncle didn’t come from round here, you must remember. I keep on calling him my uncle . . . ) “What was the fellow called?” says my uncle . . . “Do you mean, Antoine Bougalet?” says my father . . . “No, that’s not it. He was called——” “Clovis Rouillot?” “No, no, the name was——” “Adrien Bouchat?” . . . “No, no, no, no. His name was—now I’ve got it—Achille! Achille—that was his name!” . . . “Ah, you mean Achille Guérillot,” my father said. “Well, so far as I know he isn’t doing so badly and anyway he isn’t complaining. He’s lying quiet as quiet alongside his parents in the cemetery. Poor Achille,” my father said, “he had a bad time dying. He died the day before his fifty-second birthday, and that I know for certain because it was the day after my own fifty-second birthday and I came into the world two days before him. The poor old fellow, he started to get the shakes, I remember, two years before he died.” . . . That’s what my father said. Two years, he said. And two from fifty-two leaves fifty. So you see Achille was fifty when he started to get the shakes and here’s this son of his starting when he’s barely thirty. And let me tell you something. Félicien’s a man who knows how to drink. . . .’

Secure in his reputation as a drinker, Félicien might develop political ambitions and find himself compelled by the necessities of his electoral campaign to drink in public. I can see a fine theme here for a good, boozy novel, bursting with fearless realism and devilish profound psychology, but the very thought of it makes me tired. I am too immersed in the present. There are certain lateral trends which have started all kinds of contemporary gimmicks fizzing at the back of my head. I simply haven’t the heart to write about sun-bathed terraces and merry little wines. In consequence of which, I

will now tell a sad story about wine. It happens in Paris, and the name of the hero is Duvilé.

There lived in Paris, in January in the year 1945, a certain Étienne Duvilé, aged thirty-seven or eight, who adored wine. Alas, he had none. Wine cost 200 francs a bottle, and Duvilé was not rich. A clerk in the Government service, he asked nothing better than to be bribed, but his was an unrewarding post where there was nothing to sell. On the other hand he had a wife, two children and a father-in-law aged seventy-two, a bad-tempered, self-indulgent old party who made a favour of the 1500 francs monthly pension which he contributed to the household budget, and would have eaten enough for half a dozen fathers-in-law if he hadn't been rationed. And pork cost 300 francs a kilo, eggs 21 francs apiece and wine, I repeat, 200 francs a bottle. On top of which the weather was bitterly cold, four degrees below freezing in the apartment, and not a stick of wood or a lump of coal. The family's only resource was to plug in the electric iron, which was passed from hand to hand at mealtimes and during their hours of leisure. When the father-in-law got hold of it he would never let go until it was taken from him by force, and the same thing happened with bread, potatoes, greens and meat, when there was any. Bitter disputes, violent and often sordid, arose between him and Duvilé. The old man would complain that he did not get the comforts to which his 1500 francs entitled him, whereupon Duvilé would invite him to go and live elsewhere and his wife would come to her father's support, calling her husband unkind names. The two men had had difficulty enough in putting up with one another even in easier times, before the war, but in those days their mutual antipathy had found a noble and abundant outlet in politics. One was a republican-socialist and the other a socialist-republican, and the gulf represented by this clash in their political views had been large enough to swallow up all other quarrels. But now that wine had failed them,

disputation in this field had ceased to be possible. The fact is that before the war wine and politics went together, each waxing and thriving upon the other. Wine drove men to politics and politics drove them to wine, generously, symbiotically, and thunderously. But in the year 1945, lacking the sustenance of wine, politics stayed buried in the newspaper. Grievances, challenges, war-cries and anathemas were squalidly concerned with matters of food and fuel. Like so many others, the Duvilé household lived in a state of constant hankering after things to eat and drink. The children's daydreams, and those of their mother and grandfather, were stuffed with sausage and pâté, poultry, chocolate and pastries. And Duvilé thought about wine. He thought of it with a sensual fervour that was sometimes acute, and at such moments felt his very soul rise strangled to his parched throat. Being by nature reserved, he said nothing to anyone of this yearning for wine that so tormented him, but in moments of solitude he lost himself in visions of bottles, casks, litres of red wine, and without emerging from his dream, taking a step backward, as it were, and contemplating this red abundance, he felt rising to his lips the despairing cry of the dying man who yet clutches at life.

On a Saturday night, with the need for wine burning within him, he got into bed beside his wife, slept badly and dreamed the following dream: 'Towards nine o'clock in the morning, in a dim half-light, he left his house to catch the métro. The entrance to the station was deserted. The ticket-collector at the barrier was a woman who turned out to be his wife. After punching his ticket she said to him casually, 'Our children are dead.' So intense was his grief that he nearly cried aloud, but he controlled himself and reflected, 'After all, I might not have known of it until later. I shall go to the party just the same.' He went down the stone circular staircase leading to the bowels of the métro and forgot his children. As he reached the third landing a patch of darkness formed in front of him, causing him to stray into a sort of

## *Across Paris*

tunnel with walls made jagged with artificial rocks. A café waiter whom he knew by sight was standing by a narrow door which he opened for him. Duvilé passed through and found himself in a large, unevenly lighted room. Drifts of shadow partly obscured the walls, one of which, in process of demolition, allowed the passage of a stream of dubious daylight which caused him a sense of acute anguish. In the middle of the room stood a table loaded with cakes and sandwiches. Two fountains of wine, white and red, played into successive basins, one below the other. Duvilé's astonishment did not cause him to lose his head. He calmly drank as an *apéritif* a glass of white wine that had no taste, and then ate several sandwiches, including one of cheese, in the hope that they would bring out the flavour of the red wine. Neither the consistency nor the taste of the sandwiches matched their appearance, and in his disappointment he began to suspect that he was the victim of a dream. To prevent himself waking up he ran to the red-wine fountain and, bending over the basin, drank like an animal. But despite his efforts and the long gulps he took he absorbed very little liquid, so little indeed that its taste still remained uncertain. In his distress he straightened himself and glanced behind him. On the other side of the table, seated in enormous armchairs, three plump, full-bellied men with large, presidential faces were watching him with malicious smiles. Duvilé wanted to run away, but he found that he was wearing no shoes. He smiled obsequiously back at them and felt no shame in doing so. One of the three men arose and addressed him without opening his mouth, his thoughts imprinting themselves upon Duvilé's mind without the trickery of words. 'We are rich and happy,' he said silently. 'We live in the depths, far below the world that suffers and runs risks. We constantly increase our happiness by thinking of the sufferings of others. We play at being poor, at being hungry and cold and frightened, and we find the game delightful. But nothing is as good as reality. That is

why I have brought you here, so that . . .' At this point the words, or rather the thoughts, of the happy man became confused and ceased to be comprehensible. Then he resumed in a huge and crushing voice that was still silent: 'Imposter! You are wearing a gold wedding-ring and a gold watch which you received on the occasion of your first communion. Give them to me!' The three happy men, each having donned an officer's cap, abruptly left their places, and Duvilé, who now had shoes on his feet, ran to the far end of the room. When it seemed that he was certain to be caught he thrust his hand into the pocket of his overcoat and fished out his wife, behind whom he sought to hide. But he was already cut off from his pursuers by a mist marked with squares along which he hurried until this criss-cross took the form of a barred pigeon-hole, behind which he found his wife selling métro tickets, bread-coupons and cleaning-pads of wire gauze. Without stopping at the pigeon-hole he ran down a sloping corridor, reflecting with extreme anxiety that his wife would be waiting for him on the platform. The corridor was several miles long, but he reached the end without having to run along it, simply by arranging figures in his head. On the platform he again suspected that he was dreaming, because beneath the vaulted roof there were several zones of light of differing degrees of intensity and having no connection between them. It was in one of these breaks in continuity that he discovered his wife. Colourless and hard to see, she was wearing an extravagant feath red hat which caused him great concern. He looked about him a number of times, fearing to find his departmental chief among the passengers. 'You must look after father,' she said to him. 'He's in his basket.' Duvilé saw his father-in-law, a few paces behind his wife, standing with both legs in one of the four compartments of a wicker bottle-carrier. Standing very erect, his arms tight at his sides, the old man was wearing the red cap of the *Chasseurs d'Afrique*. Followed by his wife, Duvilé picked up

the basket without any conscious effort and carried it to the edge of the platform, where he set it down. The string of métro coaches which the three of them thus stood awaiting had become for him an immense hope filling him with anxious joy. At length he heard the subterranean rumbling which heralded their approach, but what emerged from the tunnel was only a miniature train, a child's toy such as may be bought in a cardboard box. A feeling of violent disappointment, commensurate with his hope, rent his heart. So extreme was his anguish that he thought himself dying and awoke with groans.

Duvilé did not get to sleep again, but lay until daybreak pondering over his dream. As his thoughts dwelt upon it, details re-emerged from the depths of his consciousness and were brought into sharp relief. For him the culminating episode was his entry into that cellar of the happy life. The thought of it obsessed him throughout the Sunday morning. He replied absently to his wife and children, sought to be alone, and often paused and stayed motionless, in the midst of some activity, while he listened to the sound of a fountain, the splash of wine from a basin to the one below. As happened every Sunday morning, at about eleven he went out by himself to do the household shopping. Three days previously it had been announced that a new issue of wine was shortly to take place, and their provision merchant believed that it would be coming very soon. Duvilé had a strong feeling that it would come today. But contrary to his expectation it had not arrived, and he was as deeply disappointed as he had been when the child's train pulled into the métro station. His wife, when he returned home, asked him if he did not think he had caught 'flu, so haggard was his appearance. He was irritable and taciturn during the meal. The fountains of wine sang a sad and piercing song in his head. He ate without appetite and drank nothing at all. There was nothing on the table but a jug of water, revolting in its limpidity.

They were half-way through their meal, and Duvilé was still brooding over his dream, when suddenly the recollection of the straw bottle-carrier caused him to raise his eyes to glance at his father-in-law. A light of curiosity, of sudden astonishment, illuminated his apathetic gaze. It occurred to him abruptly that the old man had an interesting shape. His slender torso, his narrow, sloping shoulders and thin neck surmounted by a small head with a rubicund, bald crown, all this gave food for thought. 'I'm not dreaming now,' said Duvilé to himself. 'He really does look like a bottle of claret.' The notion seemed to him preposterous and he tried to turn his thoughts elsewhere, but despite himself he found his eyes constantly returning to glance furtively at his father-in-law. The resemblance became more and more striking. With his rosy cranium one could have sworn that he was a capped wine bottle.

In order to escape his obsession Duvilé went out for the afternoon, but when he again saw his father-in-law, at supper that evening, the likeness leapt to his eyes with a vividness that caused his heart to thump. The fixity of his gaze finally struck the old man, who was annoyed by it.

'There must be something very queer about me if you can't take your eyes off me. But I suppose it's because you think I'm eating too much. You think fifteen-hundred a month isn't enough to pay for a mess of cabbage-stalks, old potatoes and frozen carrots—ha!'

Duvilé blushed deeply and stammered humble apologies. He was accustomed to retort savagely to utterances of this kind, and his change of tone surprised everyone. When the meal was over and the children, playing near their grandfather, occasionally bumped against him, he intervened with a solicitude which was no less unusual.

'Be careful what you're doing,' he said sharply. 'You mustn't shake him like that.' He must be kept quite still.'



He passed a bad night, his slumber oppressed by nightmares, in which, however, no wine figured and no father-in-law. Next morning, for the first time in his life, he felt bored and irritated at the thought of having to go to the office. As a rule he went readily enough: indeed, like many other men who would blush to admit it, he preferred the atmosphere of his place of work to that of the domestic hearth. But that morning he would have liked to stay at home. Family life had suddenly acquired for him an inexplicable charm. As he stood in the lobby, about to leave, he heard a thud followed by a groan. Without even troubling to ask where the sound came from he rushed into his father-in-law's room and found him lying face down on the floor. The old man had stumbled and in falling had struck his head against the edge of the chest of drawers. Trembling with anxiety, Duvilé picked him up and helped him into the bathroom. Blood was trickling from a small cut over one eyebrow. For some moments Duvilé stood motionless, staring wide-eyed at the precious red liquid flowing as though from a fountain. It took the arrival of his wife to arouse him from his state of rapt contemplation, and while she was busying herself with the wound he murmured

'Fortunately it's near the cork. That isn't so serious.'

From that day on Étienne Duvilé went to work only with the utmost reluctance. The anxious hours he spent at the office seemed to drag interminably, for he was tormented by the fear lest in his absence his father-in-law should get broken. In the evening he would run for the métro and burst breathlessly into the apartment crying, 'Is Grandfather all right?'; and upon being assured that he was he would hasten to the old man's side and overwhelm him with tokens of solicitude, urging him to take a more comfortable armchair, fetching a cushion, watching over his movements, begging him to take care as he passed through a doorway—in short, sparing no pains to ensure him a shock-free and well-padded existence.

Touched by the change in him, his father-in-law responded with amicable gestures of his own, so that an atmosphere of affectionate harmony now prevailed in the home. Nevertheless the old man had vague misgivings when he found his son-in-law hovering round him with a corkscrew.

'Étienne, what the devil are you doing with that thing?' he asked. 'You can't have any use for it.'

'True, true,' said Duvilé with a sigh. 'It's too small.'

With a sense of frustration he returned the corkscrew to the kitchen drawer.

One day when he was on his way home to lunch Duvilé ran into an old army comrade with whom he had gone through the retreat of 1940. There are memorable bottles in the lives of all old soldiers. In the course of their reminiscences his friend asked him if he remembered how they had sheltered for a time in an abandoned wine-cellar. 'Remember Sergeant Morcau opening the bottles? One whack with a poker and he took the neck off just level with the shoulders, neat as anything.' His head filled with these recollections, Duvilé went on home. A light of secret rejoicing irradiated his countenance and his eyes bulged slightly.

'Is Grandfather all right?'

'Peep-bo!' answered the old gentleman in person, putting his head round the door.

They both laughed heartily and went to the luncheon-table. When his father-in-law was seated Duvilé approached him with the poker in his hand.

'Don't move,' he said, putting his finger under his chin.

The old man chuckled amiably. Taking a pace back wards to allow himself freedom of movement, Duvilé caught him a hefty whack on the side of the neck. The shock was severe but not fatal. The victim uttered a yell. Mme Duvilé and the children sought to intervene with cries and supplications. But Duvilé was seeing red wine. Luckily a neighbour, alarmed by the commotion, burst into the room. Thinking that a bottle

of burgundy had entered, Duvilé turned to concentrate upon him, for he was particularly fond of burgundy. But here he met with a vigorous resistance which soon caused him to give up the attempt. Escaping from the apartment he dashed downstairs, still grasping the poker. And in the street a wonderful sight met his eyes. Dozens and dozens of bottles of every conceivable vintage were parading up and down the pavement, some singly and others in groups and pairs. For a moment he stood gazing with affection at the charming spectacle of a vigorous, mature burgundy escorting a slender, long-necked bottle of Alsatian wine. Then he noticed a beggar whose dusty aspect appealed to him, and, rushing at him, he knocked him cold with a single blow of the poker. He was overpowered by two passing American soldiers and taken to the police station, where he showed a lively desire to drink the duty sergeant.

The latest news of Duvilé is that he is in a mental home, and since the doctors have put him on *eau de l'ittel* it does not look to me as though he will be ready to come out very soon. Fortunately for him, I am on the friendliest terms with his wife and father-in-law, and I hope soon to persuade them to send him into the Arbois country, to stay with a wine-grower named Félicien Guérillot, who, after numerous adventures that deserve to be recounted, has finally developed such a taste for wine that he has genuinely got the shakes.

## *Martin the Novelist*

THERE WAS once upon a time a novelist named Martin, who could not restrain himself from killing off the leading characters in his novels, and also the minor characters. These unhappy people, overflowing with hope and vigour in Chapter One, were apt to die as though of an epidemic in the course of the last twenty or thirty pages, often in the prime of life. In the end these hecatombs proved harmful to the author's reputation. While extolling his genius, people said that so many premature deaths made even his finest works too depressing to read. So they read them less and less. And the critics, who had encouraged him at the beginning, began to grow weary of his sombre tendency, hinting that he had an 'artificial approach to life' and even saying so in print.

Yet Martin was the kindest of men. He was devoted to his characters and wanted nothing more than to see them live to a ripe old age, but the impulse was too strong for him. As he approached the final chapters his heroes and heroines came apart in his hands. Despite his utmost precautions some fatality always snatched them from him. In one case he managed, by sacrificing all the other characters, to keep his heroine alive to the last page; but just as he was congratulating himself the poor girl died of a thrombosis, fifteen lines from the end. On another occasion he sought to overcome the difficulty by writing a novel about a nursery school in which no character was more than five years old, considering, and rightly, that the innocence of their age, to say nothing of probability, would disarm implacable Destiny. But unfortunately the thing turned into a saga, and by the time it

reached the fifteen-hundredth page all his infants had become octogenarians and nothing could prevent him from recording their last breath.

One morning Martin went to call on his publisher and, with a diffident smile, asked him for an advance. His publisher also smiled, but in no very encouraging manner, and asked, changing the subject:

'Have you started on the new book?'

'Oh, certainly,' said Martin. 'I've written more than a third.'

'Are you pleased with it?'

'Very,' said Martin with enthusiasm. 'Very pleased indeed. Without boasting I think I may say that I have never been happier in my choice of characters and situations. I'll tell you in two words what it's about.'

He went on to outline the plot. It was the story of a higher-grade civil servant named Alfred Soubiron, aged forty-five, with blue eyes and a small black moustache. This worthy man had lived in perfect contentment with his wife and young son until his mother-in-law, suddenly rejuvenated by plastic-surgery, inspired him with an incestuous passion which robbed him of all peace of mind.

'Splendid,' said the publisher. 'Excellent. But tell me—in spite of her appearance of youth and beauty, the mother-in-law must be getting on a bit?'

'Of course!' cried Martin. 'Exactly. That is one of the most dramatic aspects of the situation. She's seventy-one.'

'Quite so. But at the age of seventy-one, unless Providence is exceptionally well-disposed, life tends to hang by a thread.'

'She's a woman of unusually robust constitution,' said Martin. 'Indeed, when I think of the courage with which she bore . . .' He broke off, remained pensive for a moment, and then said with a worried expression: 'But it's true, of course, that a person that age is always at the mercy of an accident. And then again, the fierce blaze of an overwhelming passion

might well have the effect of. . . . Yes, I'm afraid you're right.'

'No, no, no, no, no,' said the publisher. 'My dear fellow, not at all. Not in the very least. I was only saying that to put you on your guard. After all, you can't afford to get rid of a woman who is essential to the plot. The thing would be madness.'

'Well, that's true, too,' said Martin. 'I certainly can't do without her. But I might make her die at the end—for instance, at the moment when her son-in-law, unable to contain himself any longer, forces matters to a climax. The tremendous torrent of emotion—passion, gratitude, remorse—would cause her to expire in a delirious embrace. She might easily burst a blood-vessel. I'm sure that would be medically sound.'

The publisher objected to this denouement on the grounds of its awe-inspiring banality, the more so since everyone would be expecting it, knowing Martin's tendencies. After a lengthy argument he got Martin to agree that at the worst the mother-in-law would simply fall into a coma, leaving the reader a ray of hope. Martin's obstinacy had annoyed him, and he asked sharply:

'What about the other characters? They're all right, I hope. I take it there's nothing the matter with Alfred Soubiron?'

Beneath his stern gaze Martin turned pink and hung his head.

'I'll tell you exactly how it is,' he said. 'Alfred Soubiron has always been the picture of health. He never knew a day's illness until just the other day, when he stupidly went and caught congestion in one lung while waiting for a bus. But I must explain that this is necessary to the story. His wife's away, you see, and so he is nursed by his mother-in-law. It is the intimacy of the sick-room which reveals to him the nature of his passion and may even cause him to declare it.'

'Oh, well, so long as it's just part of the plot. The great

thing now is to get him fit again as soon as possible. How's he coming along?"

Martin blushed again and murmured

'Not too well, I'm afraid I was working on the book this morning, and his temperature rose to a hundred and two point eight I'm rather worried about him'

'For God's sake!' cried the publisher 'He isn't going to die, is he?'

'One never knows,' said Martin 'There could be complications The other lung might be affected To tell you the truth, that's what I'm afraid of'

The publisher managed to suppress his irritation He said, in a manner that was still amiable

'I'm sure it can't be as bad as all that After all, if Soubiron dies the whole thing falls to bits When you consider that——'

'Well, yes,' said Martin 'But I've been thinking over the consequences of his death, and as a matter of fact it doesn't greatly worry me Rather the opposite, in fact With him dead the mother-in-law will be free to pursue what she holds to be her true destiny—that of a beautiful woman So then we have the strange situation of this enchanting creature, passionately desired by men, listening to their burning avowals in all the serenity of her seventy-one years As you will realise, such an attitude of superb and pitying indifference would be scarcely possible in the case of a man to whom she was already closely related Thanks to Soubiron's death I am left with the eternal theme of unattainable beauty—but rejuvenated, transformed—in a word, brought up to date' In this monstrous duality of nature and appearance I already seem to discern the lurking presence of a sinister threat, the nature of which is still not clear to me, but which is like the seed of death . '

Huddled in his armchair, and rapidly turning purple, the publisher was regarding his author with a baleful eye. Martin noticed his apparent agitation, but thinking merely that he

was shaken to the depths of his being by the beauty of the theme, he continued in a voice of exaltation:

'I see her suitors, and I'm sure you do too, vainly seeking access to that unresponsive heart and finally dying of consumption and despair. And finally she, too, grows weary of an existence so lacking in humanity, and comes to hate the spurious beauty of her face and body. One night, on returning from a reception at which an academician and a youthful diplomat have committed suicide at her feet, she empties a bottle of vitriol over herself and dies in unspeakable torments. There can be no doubt that this is the climax which the inner truth of the theme requires. And then——'

But Martin was allowed to proceed no further. Leaning across his desk, his publisher thumped it with such violence as to cause pens, draft-contracts and galley-proofs to bounce on to the floor, while he bellowed that he had heard enough.

'Not a halfpenny,' he shouted, 'not a brass farthing will I invest in this revolting massacre! And don't you come here asking me for advances! I should be mad to encourage you in your grisly pursuits. If you want any money, bring me a manuscript with every character glowing with health from the first page to the last! Not a single death, no disease and not even a passing thought of suicide! Until then there's nothing doing!'

Rightly incensed by the tyranny of his publisher, Martin abandoned his novel for more than a week. He even thought of giving up literature altogether and becoming a newsboy or a waiter in a café as a gesture of protest against the abominable oppression of writers by the commercial exploiters of art and intellect. However, his anger presently abated and his need of money prompted him to discover honourable and even glorious reasons for Alfred Soubiron's recovery. His second lung was mercifully unaffected, and his temperament steadily improved. His convalescence was perhaps a little



on the long side, but it took place in an atmosphere of simmering passion which furnished material for three excellent chapters. Satisfactory though this was, however, Martin still regretted having given up his first idea, and indeed suffered twinges of conscience, as though he had been untrue to the necessities of the drama over which he was presiding. Soubiron's recovery shocked him, just as the dazzling youthfulness of his mother-in-law, now that she was no longer threatened with death, seemed to him indecent. He had to be constantly on his guard against the temptation to give them a stab of rheumatism, harmless in itself, by way of reminding them, in their state of offensive good health, that all flesh is grass. But knowing only too well the slippery slope on to which even this trifling act of revenge would lead him, he concentrated his thoughts on the gratifying vision of the cheque-book waving in his publisher's hand and thereby fortified his resolution. In any event, his unease of conscience was not wholly without beneficial effects, since it caused him to exercise an extreme rigour in the development of his plot. His publisher might deny him the use of accident, but he would make no concessions in the sphere of psychological truth.

One afternoon when he was seated at his desk engaged in a tumultuous chapter, Martin heard his front-door bell ring, and called, 'Come in!' A woman of impressive dimensions entered his study. Clad without elegance but in a well-to-do manner, she carried an umbrella of sober aspect. Her face was soft and plump. Between her several chins and the V of her décolleté, her skin had that blotched and empurpled look that is to be seen in full-blooded women entering middle-life.

Being absorbed in the intricacies of a lengthy sentence, Martin made an apologetic gesture with his left hand, without raising his eyes or taking his pen from the paper. The visitor took a chair a short distance away and sat silently observing

his profile by the light of the table-lamp. As she did so the expression of her placid, housewifely face changed, seeming to hesitate between anger and awe. At moments her gaze followed the writer's pen as it travelled over the paper, and her eyes in the half-darkness shone with an eager curiosity.

'Forgive me,' said Martin, rising. 'I took the liberty of finishing a sentence that had to be written in a single breath. It is one of the absurd things about our calling that we always think we are driven by inspiration.'

He then waited for her to say something equally polite in return, and indeed he saw her lips move, but nothing came from them except an unintelligible murmur. She seemed to be in a state of intense emotion. He apologised for keeping her in the dark and went and switched on the ceiling light. At first sight, in this brighter illumination, her face seemed familiar; but on studying her further he was convinced that he had never met her before. As their eyes met she said in a voice of melancholy irony:

'Of course, you don't recognise me?'

Martin repudiated this, but with a question in his voice, as though inviting her to jog his memory. The lady bowed her head over her umbrella, on which she had perceived a trace of dust. After brushing it away with her gloved hand she said, as she raised her eyes:

'I am Mme Alfred Soubiron.'

Martin was in no way astonished at being thus confronted by the wife of his hero. It is not unusual for a novelist to be visited by his characters, although they do not ordinarily manifest themselves in so substantial a form. But this was at least evidence that he had brought the lady to life with an incomparable mastery, and he found himself reflecting: 'If only the reviewers could be here, the ones who talk about my "artificial approach"! This would show them!' Meanwhile Mme Soubiron was saying with a sigh that rose from the depths of her corsage:

'I was sure you wouldn't recognise me. A married woman of forty-seven, faithful and devoted, a good housekeeper, one who has never failed in her duty or given rise to a breath of scandal—characters of this sort are of only minor importance, having no interest for the novelist. You prefer the sort of creature who . . .'

Shocked by the bitter tone in which she spoke, Martin made a gesture of protest. She went on hurriedly, fearing to offend him:

'I am not reproaching you. I know what artists are. M. Martin, I think you have probably guessed the purpose of my visit. When, two months ago, I left for the south of France with my young son, my mother had undergone her operation, but her face was still covered by bandages and no one knew what the result would be. Not until I returned home the day before yesterday did I learn that she had been transformed into a young woman. The change in her—merciful heavens! . . .'

'She is delicious, isn't she?' said Martin. •

'Delicious . . . delicious! How can a woman of seventy-one be delicious? Mother is simply ridiculous. And what about me, looking twenty years older than her? I suppose you didn't think of that. But you should at least have been revolted at the idea of this shameful passion. Poor M. Soubiron, such a quiet, steady-going man, and so affectionate—how he can possibly . . . But what has been going on while I've been away? You know more about it than anyone.'

'Alas,' said Martin with a sigh, 'it is like the working of a remorseless destiny. No one wrote to tell you because they did not want to disturb you unduly, but as you know, M. Soubiron fell so gravely ill that his life was in danger. Your mother nursed him with the utmost devotion, and her constant presence at the bedside inevitably fostered a dangerous intimacy. No man of forty-five can remain unmoved by the spectacle of such youth and beauty seeming to exist for

him alone. You must try to understand. In fairness to M. Soubiron it must be said that he fought against it with all his strength. Not until last Monday did he allow any hint of love to escape him. They had their usual game of dominoes after supper, and he deliberately lost, although the stake was twenty-five *sous*.'

Mme Soubiron's eyes widened and her hands trembled. She said in a shattered voice:

'Alfred lost on purpose? . . . This is the end!'

'No, no,' said Martin. 'You must not give up hope. Their passion has not yet been consummated. Moreover, your mother's spiritual state is one of extreme indecision. She is still searching her soul. Is she capable of a love equal in all respects to that of your husband? I personally would not yet venture to say that she is.'

'At least one thing is certain,' groaned Mme Soubiron, 'and that is that Alfred loves her. I have seen the way he looks at her. There are things a wife cannot fail to recognise.'

'It would be useless to try to pretend that he is not deeply in love,' agreed Martin. 'There is something profoundly moving and indeed beautiful in the intensity of his desire, the sheer, pent-up violence of a capacity for love that has never found its true outlet . . .'

Mme Soubiron went scarlet, flushing to the edge of her modest décolleté, and only the indignation which nearly choked her prevented her from uttering a furious protest. Martin, carried away with enthusiasm for his subject, and forgetting who his visitor was, went on talking as though to a fellow-craftsman.

'I will even admit,' he said with a deprecating smile, 'that despite my wish to remain strictly detached, this growth of a flaming desire that threatens to overthrow all barriers, to burst all bonds, does not leave me wholly unmoved. It touches a chord in me, I must confess. There are times when I am so affected by the heavily charged atmosphere that it is

all I can do to restrain myself from hurrying on the moment of union. You will say that this is a risk every artist must face. True, but it is also a condition of the artist that he shall not be made of wood . . .’

Mme Soubiron had risen to her feet and now bore down on him clutching her umbrella. So threatening was her aspect that he retreated to the other side of his desk

‘Not made of wood!’ she cried. ‘You can be made of anything you like, Monsieur, but I forbid you to drag M. Soubiron into a life of lust and debauchery. I forbid it! If, as you say, you wish to hurry on the moment of union, then let it be the legitimate union of a husband and wife who have always lived together in perfect harmony. That would be a subject for a *respectable* novel, far better, let me tell you, than the vileness you conjure up! I have spiritual states too, Monsieur, and all the rest of it, and M. Soubiron has never had any reason to complain of them. So what is the point of this story of yours?’

Thus speaking she reached out a hand towards the sheets of manuscript scattered over the desk, and when Martin interposed his hand to restrain her she tried to push them on to the floor with the point of her umbrella, after which she dug it into his ribs as though it were a sword. Finally, exhausted by her outburst of rage, and fearing his anger, she sank back into her armchair and burst into tears.

As he contemplated her distress Martin could not escape a feeling of remorse. It was all very well to argue that the matter, however trying, was not a catastrophe for Mme Soubiron, since her husband was not going outside the family circle; but his conscience was still not at rest, and he could not help thinking that if Soubiron had been carried off in good time by pulmonary complications, his widow, with a State pension, might have lived the rest of her days in peace, cherishing the memory of a model husband. However, it was too late for that now.

Mme Soubiron dried her eyes and turned to him with a look of supplication.

'*Maître*,' she said (she called him *Maître* to flatter him), 'you see the extent of our unhappiness. Be generous, let your heart be touched. Consider the abyss of shame into which a respectable family must be plunged by a passion of this nature. My husband has been decorated with the Légion d'Honneur, he has always been highly thought of by his superiors. And consider the case of my poor mother, whose life has hitherto been beyond reproach. I realise, of course, that like all writers you are an anti-clerical, but since you know us better than anyone I may venture to remind you of the religious sentiments which have always played so large a part in our family life. . . .'

Martin was listening with lowered head, visibly ill-at-ease.

'*Maître*, with your immense talent you have no need of such horrors to enable you to write a superb novel. . . .'

'Of course not,' said Martin. 'But the truth is that I have less responsibility in the matter than you might think. An honest novelist is like God, he has only limited powers. His creatures are free. He can only suffer with them in their misfortunes and regret that their prayers are in vain. He has over them only the power of life and death; and in the sphere of chance, where destiny sometimes allows him a small margin, he may be able to afford them modest consolations. But we can no more change our minds than can God himself. All things are ordained in the beginning, and once the arrow has been loosed it cannot be drawn back.'

'But you aren't going to tell me that your pen writes all by itself?'

'No, but I can't do exactly what I like with it, just as your husband, when he writes a report for his Ministry, cannot put down everything that comes into his head. I am under a scarcely less rigid compulsion, I assure you.'

But Mme Soubiron refused to believe in these bounds to

his omnipotence. She said he had only to pick up his pen and write what she dictated. And when he shrugged his shoulders in despair she added sharply

‘So you won’t do anything for me?’

‘On the contrary,’ said Martin, ‘I’m most anxious to do everything in my power.’

‘Well?’

‘But what do you want me to do? Would you care to go for a sea voyage with your son? The distance would make your husband’s infidelity easier to bear, if the worst——’

‘In other words, go away and leave him free to do what he pleases! It would be as good as helping him!’

Martin considered Mme Soubiron for a moment in silence, as though weighing the various possibilities which Destiny allowed him in her case.

‘A lover, now,’ he said, without much conviction. ‘Would you care to have a lover?’

Mme Soubiron rose from her chair, and gazing coldly at him, took her leave with a jerk of her chin.

‘Poor woman,’ he reflected after she was gone. ‘There is only one way of bringing her suffering to an end and that is by arranging for her death. Never mind what the publisher says. One has to be human, after all. I’ll give her another three weeks, just long enough to let her witness the consummation of the adultery. Her reactions will, I am sure, be most interesting.’

The Soubiron family was having supper. Leaning towards his mother-in-law, M. Soubiron said in a hoarse voice

‘Have another slice of veal. It’ll do you good.’

She refused with a self-conscious smile, and a faint flush overspread her face. It was terrible but moving to observe the concupiscent gaze with which he devoured that exquisite

feminine profile, those admirably moulded bare arms, that firm corsage pounding with emotion.

'Alfred,' said Mme Soubiron in acid tones, 'you shouldn't encourage Mother to over-eat. At her age it's far better for her to have a light meal in the evening.'

The Soubirons' son, a boy of nine, was so tactless as to ask his grandmother's age, and to persist until his father was obliged to rebuke him.

'I've told you before not to speak unless you're spoken to. Really, I've never known such a stupid child!'

A heavy silence fell in the mahogany-panelled dining-room. Soubiron was feeling for his mother-in-law's leg under the table. His eyes were rolling, his neck thickening in his collar. Finally, losing all self-control, he murmured:

'Armandine! Armandine!'

It was the first time he had called her by her Christian name, at least in the presence of the others, and at this fresh blow Mme Soubiron was seized with a fury of revolt, not so much against her husband and her mother but against the doom overshadowing the family, the abominable power of Martin. She began to consider whether she might not resist this destiny and in some decisive manner defy its perpetrator. What was he, after all, this man who ordered their lives at the whim of his pen? A mere scribbler, a trifler owing his omnipotence to the acquiescence of his characters and their lack of spirit. Mme Soubiron felt that there must be some way for her to escape this sinister fate. Although it would doubtless serve little purpose to deny and execrate their creator, might it not be possible to evade his control and thwart his activities—for example, by placing oneself in a situation where the pen of the novelist refused to follow, by taking refuge outside reality and outside the ineluctable course of events ordained by the creator at the beginning—that is to say, in the realm of the absurd and unreal?

Mme Soubiron made a great effort of imagination. To the



general astonishment she uttered a loud burst of laughter and, removing her shoe, put it on her plate. After which she snatched a slice of veal from the dish and thrust it down the front of her dress.

'How hungry I was!' she said, rubbing her stomach with a gesture of satisfied gluttony.

Her mother and husband exchanged startled glances. She took another slice of veal and then began to sing the refrain of the *Carmagnole*. But then she broke off abruptly, having suddenly thought that this foolishness was not really beyond all possibility and that Martin had probably intended it. Far from troubling him, she was simply adding another page to his novel. As the others clustered solicitously about her, asking if she felt quite well, she answered dispiritedly:

'You needn't be frightened. I was trying something, but it wasn't right. It didn't work.'

Perturbed nevertheless by this singular outburst, her husband curbed his shameful advances and was at pains to bring her into the conversation, which thereafter became quite animated. They talked about a cousin living in Clermont-Ferrand, the rise in taxes and a method of cooking sheep's tongue with bacon and mushrooms, and Mme Soubiron appeared to take the liveliest interest in all these matters, contributing to the discussion the simple home-truths and sturdy good sense that she had brought to the household as her dowry. But at moments, generally after speaking, she betrayed signs of nervous agitation and absence of mind. This was when she had the feeling of having said nothing that Martin had not authorised and approved. The more she thought about it, the more intolerable did her dependence upon him become.

All that night she stayed awake seeking the key to the problem. Such was her sense of outrage at the state of servitude in which she was kept by Martin that she almost

forgot the drama which was shaking the family to its foundations. Her husband's rhythmic snoring, as he lay at her side, exasperated her, and she despised him for surrendering to his author without any desire to rebel.

She switched on the light to look at him as he lay sleeping, and it occurred to her that it would serve Martin right if she murdered him in his sleep. It might ruin the novel and destroy the whole fabric Martin had created. She went and got her husband's revolver out of the drawer, but then her heart failed her. Not even the thought that Martin was refusing his consent could goad her to the act, and she put the revolver back. In any case a moment's thought convinced her that Soubiron's death, had it occurred, would also have been in the natural order of events. It was not here that the solution was to be found.

She lay awake until daybreak, her thoughts intent upon inspecting the bounds of the prison that enclosed her, while she sought the loophole that would afford her a way out, but she was confronted by a solid wall whichever way she turned. In the end she perceived that conscious thought, far from helping her, merely hemmed her in more tightly. On the other hand, when at moments of extreme weariness she lost the thread of her thoughts, she had a sense of being on the pathway of escape. Lying with her mind a blank, her thoughts surging at random, she found herself suddenly at that frontier where Martin lost almost all control and authority. She seemed to be drawing near to safety and she had a sense of deliverance. But then, as a half-formed conscious thought re-established contact with reality, Martin took her again in his grip and locked all the doors of the prison.

Thereafter Mme Soubiron devoted her efforts to winning her liberty without thinking about it. Instead of growing exasperated and finding reasons for revolt against the tyranny of Martin, she merely repeated in her mind, sometimes moving her lips: 'I want to escape . . . to escape . . .'

During the week that followed Alfred Soubiron's passion waxed in intensity. Every evening he brought home a great bunch of roses which cost Heaven knew what.

'Some flowers for you, my dear,' he would say to his wife, while in a scarcely less audible voice he murmured to his mother-in-law 'For you, all for you, Armandine. . . .'

Mme Soubiron endured these outrages with a surprising patience, and scarcely even grew thinner. Now and then an explosion escaped her, but it happened less and less often. Profiting by her apparent indifference, Soubiron's attentions to his mother-in-law became more marked. One evening Mme Soubiron came upon him kissing the back of her neck while his hands clasped her bosom. She smiled kindly at the two of them and said:

'The towel-horses go on tip-toe. . . . There is a taste of Wednesday in the air . . . We shall soon be using hairpins to hold our breath'

Martin was busy working when his best friend, Mathieu Mathieu, the noted film critic, dropped in on him. Mathieu brought with him a lady, known as la petite Jiji, whom he had collected in passing at the Edredon Bar. The two men talked for some time about the future of railways. Mathieu maintained that they would soon disappear, to be replaced entirely by road transport, which would be enormously profitable. Martin didn't believe it. He took the view that railways were still in their infancy. The stupendous potentialities of electrification were not yet fully realised. Jiji sat curled up in an armchair without joining in the debate. Finally she remarked, addressing herself more particularly to Mathieu Mathieu:

'What a shattering pair of bores you are, with your railways and your motor-coaches.'

'Hold your tongue!' said Mathieu angrily. 'Do you think

you're in your own home? . . . My God, when I think that I've been dragging this hen-wit around with me for a whole year, and all on account of a pair of legs that happened to catch my eye one night when I was tight!

'You're the one that ought to hold your tongue,' retorted Jiji. 'You've no business to go talking about my legs in front of strangers. Next thing you know, he'll be putting me in a novel.'

'What about a drop of *fine*?' said Martin soothingly. 'As it happens, I've just bought——'

'A pair of legs!' bellowed Mathieu, taking no notice. 'I have flung myself away on a pair of legs, my magnificent talent and everything I possess! It makes me sick. I wish to Christ a war would break out, and a bloody good plague into the bargain. God almighty, how life stinks when one's in the middle of it!'

As though turning his back upon life, he strode over to the window, which gave on to a dark courtyard. Having recovered from his fit of melancholy he came back to the middle of the room, nodded at the scribbled sheets scattered over Martin's desk, and said:

'Is this thing of yours coming along all right?'

'Oh, yes—it's coming on.'

'You don't sound too pleased with it,' said Mathieu Mathieu.

'I'm not actually displeased. The novel's turning out as I meant it to—I can't complain. But—well, I told you what it was about, didn't I? . . . I wish you wouldn't spit on the floor. I've asked you before. The housemaid doesn't like it . . . If you remember, I told you the subject——'

'That's quite right,' said Jiji. 'It's disgusting to spit on the floor. People pretend they're well brought-up, and all they do is——'

'It really doesn't matter,' said Martin. 'Sometimes one wants to spit and just doesn't think. I was hearing about an

admiral's wife only the other day, a Countess Someone-or-other, who used to spit on the floor during meals'

'Well I still think it's disgusting'

'Will you for crying out loud put a sock in it!' yelled Mathieu Mathieu

'Easy now,' said Martin 'No need to get excited Do you remember what my novel's about?'

'More or less Something about a civil servant whose mother-in-law is having her face and other things lifted Yes, I remember it now Not much film value in it that I can see Not enough movement Well, anyway, what's the problem?'

'Well, nothing, really But I've just had a rather unpleasant surprise I think I mentioned Soubiron's wife to you, without saying much about her She's what you might term the classic figure of a model housewife—forty-seven years old, robust, devoted, faithful and economical You know the kind of thing—home-made jam, the *Figaro*, and a little tea-party once a month for the wives of her husband's colleagues'

'You're making my mouth water,' said Mathieu Mathieu 'Why didn't I have the luck to meet a woman like that?'

'In short, such a thoroughly commonplace character, of whom there was so little to be expected that I intended to keep her in the background as much as possible I was really rather sorry I'd ever created her My first surprise was when I found how unhappy she was One doesn't realise what depths there may be in those bovine temperaments—a sort of virginity of suffering Still, you'll be able to read what I've written about all that Wonderful stuff But so as not to let her steal the whole book, and also out of sheer humanity, I was going to make her die at the moment when she learns that her husband has betrayed her It would have been a matter of a fortnight—three weeks at the outside'

'So you're still at your old game of killing them off I'd like to know what right you have'

'What right? The novelist's right, of course! I can't make my characters laugh when they feel like crying. I can't make them behave according to impulses which are not theirs, but I can always bring their lives to an end. Death is something that everyone carries with him at every moment, so that any moment I care to choose is the right one.'

'Well, possibly. And I've nothing against a death from time to time, just to make people think. But you don't want to overdo it.'

'Well, to come back to Soubiron's wife, her case is really most curious. With her, suffering turned at once to a state of exalted anguish—obsession with Fate. You'd never have thought it, would you? But that's what happened. And one night she rebelled.'

'Rebelled against what? Against Fate?'

'Nothing of the kind, old boy. Our Madame Soubiron isn't such a fool. She knows there's no such thing as Fate or Destiny, that they're only figures of speech. No, she rebelled against God. Because God exists. God is *me*, Martin—I'm God! Here's what she said to herself. "God has created me in all my parts and I cannot make him alter me. Indeed, he refuses to interfere in my life. He maintains simply that I am obliged in all things to behave according to the workings of a particular mechanism which he calls my inner truth. So I shall break out of myself." . . . And yesterday evening Mme Soubiron succeeded in breaking out of herself. She went mad. I fancy her husband will have to put her in a mental home within the next few days. In any case, she has escaped me completely.'

'Well, you can still bump her off. That's what you meant to do anyway.'

'But no, that's exactly what I can't do any longer! That's what's so infuriating. In all honesty, I can't do it. How am I to know whether the mad are mortal at every instant of day and night? Who can tell me? Perhaps they have moments

when they are invulnerable. Perhaps they are always invulnerable, and die only in a flash of sanity. I once heard a doctor say that madness restores some sick people to health and gives others a vitality they never possessed before. At all events, I am not going to run the risk of causing someone to die in defiance of natural laws. So I've simply got to put up with it. Mme Soubiron has left my novel, or if you like, she exists in it only as a memory. It's such a nuisance. There's no one else I can kill. My publisher probably wouldn't have minded the death of a minor character, but he'll never accept that of Soubiron or his mother-in-law, and seeing that I need the money. . . . Only yesterday I tried to get him to allow me to polish off Soubiron, but he was adamant.'

Mathieu Mathieu gazed pensively at Jiji, who had fallen asleep in her armchair while reading the evening paper. His gaze travelled to a silk-clad leg, uncovered above the knee. It was a very pretty leg, and he could not take his eyes off it. Finally he made a furious gesture, as though tearing off the shackles, and inclining his head towards Martin he said in a low voice:

'Listen, old man, couldn't you bring Jiji into your novel? She'd only be a minor character, if that. I'm sure your publisher would have no objection . . . in short—well—you could do what you liked with her, you see.'

'People can't just walk into a novel of mine as though it were a railway station,' said Martin.

'No, of course not. But after all, we're old friends. As a favour to me. . . .'

'You're asking something very serious. I don't know if you realise. For one thing, it's an extremely delicate operation. One can't force her into it. She would have to be persuaded—lured in, so to speak. Not at all easy. And really, when you come right down to it—poor little Jiji! I wouldn't want anything to happen to her.'

'Martin, I beseech you, don't deny me this. Don't refuse to rescue me. Think what a wretched life I lead!'

'But, my dear old boy, it wouldn't help you in the least. I know you. I know how much those legs mean to you. You've got them under your skin, and that's all there is about it. I know exactly what would happen. The moment Jiji came into the novel you'd follow her. And then what? You'd be an even more minor character.'

'You don't mean to say you'd kill me off too?' exclaimed Mathieu Mathieu.

'Well, there's no telling, is there?' said Martin, shrugging his shoulders. 'It would depend on circumstances.'

Mathieu Mathieu, after staring at his best friend in horror, sprang from his chair and went and shook Jiji.

'Get up, you slut, we're going! I am a man accursed! I haven't a friend in the world—nothing—nothing but a blasted pair of legs! I am an orphan of the storm, a pariah, an outcast, a child of the damned. And writers are nothing but bloody butchers! Come along, darling, you go first. He wanted to murder me. Jiji, I'm afraid. God knows what he'll be up to next, in his infernal novels. The man frightens me. For God's sake cover up your legs!'

Mme Soubiron was in a mental home and the boy had been sent as a boarder to a Jesuit school. During the first days of his wife's absence Alfred Soubiron asked himself constantly whether he dared take advantage of this tragic situation to break down his mother-in-law's resistance. And with the utmost hypocrisy he answered himself that although he could never have inflicted this humiliation on his wife if she had retained her reason, in her present condition the need to spare her suffering did not arise. Needless to say, he did not fail to make use of this argument to his mother-in-law.

'No, no, it's impossible!' protested Armandine. 'You forget that I am her mother.'



'Exactly,' said Soubiron 'So isn't it your duty to replace her in the home?'

'I have no right to do so. Don't torture me, Alfred. It would be a dreadful thing.'

'I know, I know,' said Soubiron, still bursting with hypocrisy 'We are undergoing a severe trial, but God will aid us.'

At these words Armandine sighed, wondering whether Martin was really resolved to carry the situation to its logical conclusion. She did not like to think so. Belonging, as she did, to an earlier generation, her ideas concerning novelists were necessarily different from those of the present day, and she was far from suspecting, poor soul, the inexorable rigour of the laws of objectivity and fearless realism by which their genius is governed. She supposed, in her innocence, that after devising situations of a possibly perilous nature it was the novelist's duty so to arrange matters as to bring about an exemplary ending. This belief caused her to remain obdurate, and Soubiron was quick to realise that he could not hope to achieve his aim by persuasion alone. Accordingly he changed his tactics. Upon returning from the office he would rush at her with a wild ferocity, hoping to overwhelm her by surprise, but being slim and supple she always managed to get away and would flee from him through the apartment. The reader must turn to Martin's novel for the account of those breathless pursuits, the cries, the overturned furniture, the cat's dinner spilt, the vases crackling beneath their feet.

'Armandine, I *desire* you!' the male would bellow, adding horrible obscenities.

'Alfred, my beloved, you're crucifying me!' she would moan in reply, leaping nimbly over an armchair.

Mercifully, Armandine was able to get her breath during the hours when Soubiron was at the office, but, a prey to melancholy reflections, she found solitude weighing heavily upon her. It was a relief when one day she received an

invitation to the Gala of the Flying Pen, presided over by an illustrious author and having a leading publisher as vice-president. Filled with gratitude to Martin, who had sent her the invitation, she hurried to her dressmaker.

The Gala of the Flying Pen was a literary function of the highest distinction and brilliance. Speeches were delivered extolling the progress of Thought, and persons of wit and culture said unforgettable things while sipping champagne. Armandine's entrance gave rise to a general murmur of admiration, the men remarking that they had never seen a woman with so much sex-appeal. The vice-president, who was none other than Martin's publisher, could not take his eyes off her. Several other novel heroines were present, and were being proudly introduced by their authors, but not one was a patch on Armandine.

Martin's publisher came to greet her, and never had his compliments to Martin been so sincere. After a few minutes of conversation Martin excused himself on the grounds of an urgent appointment and left them together. The publisher led Armandine to the buffet, where they drank several glasses of champagne. He forgot all about his duties as vice-president, and by the time the party was over he was deeply in love.

That same evening Martin received a telephone-call.

'Hallo? Is that you, Martin, my dear fellow? This is your publisher speaking. I felt that I really must congratulate you again. My dear chap, what a wonderful creation! Exquisite! Superb! Such charm, such simplicity, and so true to life! One of the great characters of fiction, my dear Martin, I have not a doubt of it. A character destined to live in the reader's memory.'

'You really think so? It's extremely nice of you to say so.'

'There's just one thing. I'm thinking about publication. It would be very helpful to me—simply for purposes of publicity, you understand—to have the opportunity of

studying the lady a little more closely. Do you think I could possibly see her?’

‘Well, good heavens, yes, why not? I always leave her free in the afternoons. She certainly wouldn’t refuse to receive you.’

‘That’s most kind of you, my dear fellow. . . . Hullo? I said, you’re most kind. . . .’

‘There’s nothing else, is there?’ asked Martin in a strained voice. ‘The other characters, for instance. . . . There’s nothing else you’d like me to do?’

After a slight pause the voice of the publisher answered with a certain hesitation:

‘Er—no, nothing else . . . Thank you, my dear fellow, a thousand times.’

Martin hung up with an air of extreme disappointment. He dressed and went to the Edredon Bar. Mathieu Mathieu was hotly defending his last five hundred francs against Jiji, who wanted to buy herself a sports suit. He was arguing that civilisation was in peril and likely to disappear in the near future if the best people did not set an example by returning to a simpler way of life, even to austerity.

‘You take me, for example,’ he was saying, ‘the greatest film critic in Paris and probably in Europe. I ask you, did you ever see a dirtier or more worn-out tie than the one I’m wearing? And what’s more, I’ve been wearing it for the last two years, although not for lack of money. It’s only three weeks since Mammoth Productions slipped me three thousand for praising their latest stinker. I could have bought a whole drawerful of ties if I’d wanted to, but I didn’t because I know that to live simply is to be pure and strong and give free rein to the life of the spirit.’

‘You’d sooner spend the money on drink,’ said Jiji, ‘and anyway, I don’t see what could be more simple than a sports suit.’

She was embarking for the tenth time on a description of

the particular suit she had in mind, all pure wool, when Martin arrived. She kept herself bottled up while greetings were being exchanged; but just as she was about to break out again Mathieu Mathieu kicked Martin under the table and said:

'By the way, what about your rent? Have you managed to raise the money?'

'My rent? . . . Oh, my rent. . . . I'd rather you didn't talk about it. I don't know where to turn. If I haven't found the money by tomorrow morning my landlord's going to put the bailiffs in. I suppose, old boy, you couldn't by any chance . . . '

'Sorry, old man. Anyway, I've only got five hundred, and that wouldn't be enough.'

'But it would! It would just do. I know where I can put my hands on the other two hundred. Oh, won't you lend it to me? I swear I'll pay it back. Think of my furniture, Mathieu, my knick-knacks, my little odds and ends. . . . '

Jiji, growing red in the face, watched Mathieu while he listened, hesitating and shaking his head. At length he got out the five hundred franc note and handed it to Martin, saying with a sigh:

'I can't bear to think of an old friend in trouble. It's something I just can't bear.'

With tears of indignation in her eyes, Jiji got up and left the table without saying good-bye or even powdering her nose. When she was gone Martin returned the five hundred francs, and the two friends settled down to chat about their respective vocations. Mathieu Mathieu said that he had just entered the initial phase of an evolutionary period which looked like lasting a considerable time.

'The fact is, old boy, we don't realise how much our talent owes to commonplace necessities, the mere implements of our trade. Until last week I had always written my articles with a fountain-pen. Sheer force of habit, and perhaps a touch

of superstition. But then last week Jiji broke my pen just when I was sitting down to do my article. It was eleven o'clock at night and the copy had to be in next morning, so there was no chance to buy a new one. I had to go round to the café and borrow a pen. I don't know if you know what café pens are like—a long steel point, like a rusty hypodermic, and——'

'I know, I know.'

'Well anyway, I wrote my piece as usual, and what's so queer is that at the time I didn't notice anything out of the way. It wasn't until I came to read the stuff in print that I had a shock. My whole way of writing had changed. I'd developed a sort of piercing style that went right through to the heart of the matter and fairly tore it apart. Curious, isn't it? You aren't expecting anything, and suddenly, bingo, you're off on a new tack. Well, that's how it is with me. Mark you, I'd always had a feeling that fountain-pen nibs weren't sharp enough—anyway, not for criticism. Poetry, now, that's quite a different thing. If I ever get round to writing the poem I'm thinking about I shall certainly use a fountain-pen.'

'You're thinking of writing a poem? You never told me,' said Martin reproachfully.

'Oh, just turning it over in my mind. The poetic Muse looks to me so sick in these days, with her bulging brow and her little, foxy eye, that I sometimes shed tears into my pillow just thinking about her. I'd like to write an epic that would put some flesh on the old girl's bones. The thing would be based on the obscure consciousness of the vegetable world—or if you prefer, the organic intelligence. After centuries of being cut down to make wardrobes and other articles of furniture, the trees of the forest end by becoming aware of their destiny. So they adapt themselves, that is to say, instead of growing up straight they grow in the shape of a Henri II dresser, or a Louis XVI commode, or a Directory table. Men don't need to cut them down any more, they find

it simpler to go and live in the forest. You see what I mean? The grand reconciliation with Nature!

Lost in admiration, Martin gravely nodded his head. Mathieu Mathieu went on:

'But of course a bald summary like that doesn't tell you very much. Here are a few lines, just to put you in the picture:

'Pent in the bondage of her cage of gold  
The magnate's daughter sighs for green retreats  
Where town-dulled eyes ecstatic may behold  
The flowing sap in Nature's bedroom-suites.'

'That's fine,' said Martin. 'That's really very fine.'

Pink with pleasure, Mathieu Mathieu gazed gratefully at his friend, and after clasping him by the hand he asked:

'What about your novel? Have you found anyone to kill off?'

Martin shook his head. No, he had found no one. Mathieu Mathieu was filled with compassion. Poetry always caused him to overflow with kindness. An idea occurred to him, and in a voice quivering with sacrificial fervour he said:

'I'll come into your novel if you like.'

'Oh, no!' cried Martin. 'No, really! For one thing, you have your poem to write. And anyway, my dear old boy, I could never possibly agree to it. Think how upset I should be!'

There was a silence. Mathieu Mathieu was deeply touched by his own generosity. Martin, meanwhile, was thinking it over.

'Mark you,' he said, 'I shouldn't have the slightest trouble in disposing of you. For instance, in the chapter I'm now writing I could very easily——'

'Well, but as you don't want to do it we needn't talk about it any more,' said Mathieu Mathieu rapidly. 'How long is it going to take you to finish the book?'

'I'm nearly there. A week or ten days at the outside. But

I'm hoping that between now and then something will happen I'm expecting a visit'

The visit which Martin was expecting seemed to be delayed, and he grew daily more anxious. His novel was now very near its end, and he was finding Alfred Soubiron increasingly unrestrainable except during his crises of despair. At these times he was like a little child, huddled weeping at the feet of Armandine. The unhappy woman had been driven to the extreme limit of her resistance.

At length, after ringing up to say that he was coming, Martin's publisher called on him one evening after dinner. Martin noted that he was not looking at all well, and that he seemed shrunken in his clothes.

'Sit down,' said Martin. 'Well, this is a great surprise. As it happens, I was meaning to come and see you tomorrow, to talk business. I badly need an advance.'

'We'll talk about that when you come. I don't know how your account stands, but I think I may be able to manage something.'

'I'm quite sure you can. Only yesterday evening I ran into a publisher whose name I'd better not mention, and he spoke with the greatest enthusiasm of Armandine, whom he had met at the Gala of the Flying Pen. He said he was sure that after a success like that you must have come across with something handsome. I didn't like to undeceive him, but I must say I was rather embarrassed at being seen out in such a shabby suit.'

'You don't have to tell me his name,' said Martin's publisher. 'I can guess who you mean. I suppose he made you an offer?'

'Well, not exactly a firm offer, but——'

'You want to watch out with that chap. He's on the verge of bankruptcy anyway. He isn't the only one who tries to

cash in on the heavy sacrifices I make in launching new authors. He'll promise the earth, but precious little ever comes of it. . . . At the same time, my dear fellow, if you're hard-pressed I'm perfectly ready. . . .'

The publisher got out his cheque-book, uttering a routine roar of protest when Martin mentioned the sum of thirty thousand francs. But he did not resist very stubbornly during the argument that followed. Clearly he was anxious to make himself agreeable to Martin, who ended by pocketing a cheque for fifteen thousand, which was five thousand more than he had dared to hope for.

'I came to talk to you about your novel,' said the publisher when this matter was settled. 'I'm most interested in your characters, and particularly in Armandine. She's an extremely charming woman with whom I feel I have much in common. You have been kind enough to let her have her afternoons off in order to afford me the opportunity of studying her, and I'm very grateful to you. But unhappily Armandine has not been as responsive to my efforts to get to know her as I had hoped. She remains aloof, if you see what I mean. I have not been able to get really close to her.'

'You mustn't blame her,' said Martin. 'She has so many preoccupations.'

'Well, that's just what I wanted to talk about. If I have rightly understood the hints she has let fall, she feels herself bound by a passion which she does not share. She has no wish to yield to her son-in-law, but at the same time she feels that she would be acting disloyally to him if she turned her attention elsewhere.'

'It is a scruple that does her credit,' said Martin.

'Oh, most certainly, although on the other hand Soubiron's persistence is utterly disgraceful, when you come right down to it, and deserving of the utmost . . .'

The publisher here fell silent, seeming to wait for Martin to lead the way in developing a train of thought which he



scarcely cared to formulate. But Martin appeared not to understand, and so he eventually resumed in a playful tone.

'My dear fellow, I daresay you remember the first time we talked about your novel? We had quite an argument on the subject of the plot, and I seem to recall that I took a somewhat uncompromising attitude.'

He gave Martin an affectionate pat on the shoulder, and went on with a merry laugh.

'Of course, I know you weren't in the least offended. And anyway, anything I may have said at the time is naturally not to be taken as final. It goes without saying that you're absolutely free to do as you think best, and if you feel that someone ought to die. Well, to tell you the truth, I've been thinking about this Soubiron. He really is a bit of an encumbrance, isn't he? I don't mind admitting, my dear fellow, that his disappearance would please me as much as it would you.'

Martin nodded in agreement, but then said in a voice of melancholy:

'What a pity you came so late. I finished the novel yesterday evening. I could prolong Armandine's resistance no longer. Her son-in-law's frenzy overwhelmed her in the end, and she yielded. I'm bound to say it is a wonderful scene, profoundly moving. She undresses with an exquisite simplicity, and then. But you'll be able to read it for yourself. I mustn't spoil it for you.'

The publisher had turned pale and haggard at the news. He stammered:

'Couldn't you add another chapter?'

'Impossible,' said Martin.

He got the manuscript out of a drawer and showed it to him.

'Here's the last page. As you see, beneath the words, "the throbbing of an endless passion" I have written, "THE END".'

There was no denying the fact. For a time the publisher was silent, brooding over his disappointment. Then, as Martin returned the manuscript to its drawer, he said sharply, without much hope but more for the sake of principle:

‘Give me back that cheque!’

‘Ask me something possible,’ said Martin. ‘I desire nothing more than to please you. But you have no need to despair. Time is on your side. I have taken leave of my characters, but their lives will go on. Anything can happen. Soubiron has had congestion in one lung already—perhaps he’ll get it in both next time. Or Armandine may grow tired of him. You have only to persevere . . .’

‘No, no, I feel that for me the tale is ended,’ sighed the publisher. ‘Have you thought of a title?’

‘Not yet.’

‘To please me, will you call it *Armandine*?’

‘Certainly.’

Under the title of *Armandine* the novel had an enormous success. The fact that there was not a single death in it amazed the critics and aroused the enthusiasm of discriminating readers. Within six months it had sold seven hundred and fifty thousand copies in France alone. Martin was able to buy several new suits and a pair of shark-skin shoes. And he gave his best friend, Mathieu Mathieu, a very handsome fountain-pen, thereby enabling him to embark on his great epic and save poetry from utter decay.

## *The Dwarf*

IN HIS thirty-fifth year the dwarf belonging to the Cirque Barnaboum suddenly grew. This was very tiresome for the experts, who had laid it down once and for all that twenty-five is the age-limit for growth. That is why they took steps to hush the matter up.

Barnaboum's Circus was nearing the end of a tour designed to bring it to Paris by stages. It gave a *matinée* and two gala performances in Lyons, where the dwarf did his usual act without arousing any suspicion. He came into the ring wearing a *dude* costume and holding the hand of the Thin Man, whom he pretended not to be able to see all at once because he was so tall. And all the people in all the rows laughed because one was so tall and the other so short. The Thin Man walked with giant strides making six or seven of the dwarf's tiny paces, and when they had reached the middle of the ring he said in a resounding voice, 'I'm beginning to feel tired.' The laughter died down to permit the dwarf to say in a voice like that of a little girl, 'Excellent, M. Fifrelin. I'm delighted to hear that you're tired.' And this made everyone shout with laughter, and the people nudged one another saying, 'Aren't they a scream, the two of them together, but especially the dwarf, he's so little, and that tiny voice.' Now and then the dwarf would glance towards that deep concourse of spectators, of which the rearmost ranks were lost in darkness. The laughter and the watching eyes did not trouble him, they caused him neither pain nor pleasure. Nor did he ever experience the nervousness that afflicted other performers at the moment of entering the ring. The effort made by the clown, Pataclac, that taut straining of heart and

spirit to win the audience's allegiance, was unnecessary to him. Just as it was enough for the elephant, Tobias, to be an elephant, so it was enough for him to be a dwarf, and he had no need to love his public. At the end of his act he went skipping out of the ring, and the Thin Man, again holding his hand, would lift him off the ground in a droll fashion that drew great rounds of applause. M. Loyal then wrapped him in a cloak and took him to M. Barnaboum, who gave him a sweet, or possibly two, according to how satisfied he was with his performance.

'You're an excellent dwarf,' M. Barnaboum would say, 'but you must watch the timing of your movements.'

'Yes, Monsieur,' said the dwarf.

Then he would go to see Mlle Germina, the bareback rider, as she sat in the wings awaiting her turn. She sat very upright on her stool, her legs displayed in pink tights and her bosom restrained within a corselet of black velvet, taking care not to crumple her tutu or her pink gauze scarf. Lifting the dwarf on to her knee she would kiss his forehead and stroke his hair, talking to him in a gentle voice. There were always men around her saying mysterious-sounding things. The dwarf had long been accustomed to these ritual utterances and could have repeated them with appropriate nods and smiles, but their meaning remained for him a troublesome enigma. One evening it happened, when he was seated on Mlle Germina's knee, that only the clown, Pataclac, was standing by them, his eyes shining with a singular brightness in his floured face. Seeing him about to speak, the dwarf took it into his head to say the words for him, just for a joke, and so he murmured to the equestrienne that he could not sleep at nights because of an enchanting woman with gloriously fair hair and a tiny waist in a pink tutu which made her look like a butterfly in the morning. She burst out laughing, and the clown went off slamming the door behind him, except that there was no door.

While Mlle Germina was performing on her horse he would run to the ringside and stand close to the audience. Children would point to him laughing and exclaiming, 'There's the dwarf!' He glanced at them mistrustfully, and when he was sure their parents were not looking he liked to frighten them by making faces. Round and round the ring went Mlle Germina, the wind of her passage multiplying the folds of the pink gauze tutu. Dazzled by the brilliance of the arc-lights and the beating of her wings, exhausted by the heavy murmur and breath of life that filled the great tent, the dwarf would feel his eyelids flutter and presently would go to one of the caravans, where the old woman, Mary, undressed him and tucked him up in bed.

On the road from Lyons to Mâcon the dwarf awoke at about eight in the morning with a high temperature, complaining of violent pains in his head. Mary made him a tisane and asked if his feet were cold to make sure she slipped her hand under the bedclothes and found to her stupefaction that his feet reached the end of the bed, whereas hitherto they had come only within a foot of it. She was so startled that she opened the window and cried

'For God's sake stop! The dwarf has grown! Stop! Stop!'

But the noise of the engines drowned her voice, and in any case everyone was asleep in the caravans. Only an event of exceptional gravity could be allowed to hold up the circus train, and on second thoughts Mary was afraid lest she should incur the wrath of M. Barnaboum. So she stayed helplessly watching the growth of the dwarf, who was uttering cries of pain and fright. Now and then he questioned her in a voice that was still childish but uncertain, the voice of the awkward age.

'Mary,' he said, 'my body is aching as though it were going to break in pieces—as though all the horses in the circus

were tearing my limbs apart. What is happening to me, Mary?’

‘It’s because you’re growing, Dwarf. But don’t be afraid. The doctors will find a cure for it, and you’ll go on doing your act with the Thin Man, and your old Mary will still take care of you.’

‘If you were a man, Mary, would you rather be a dwarf or as big as M. Barnabouni, with a moustache?’

‘A moustache looks very handsome on a man,’ said Mary. ‘But then again, it’s very nice to be a dwarf.’

By nine o’clock the dwarf was forced to lie curled up like a dog in his cot, and even so he was not comfortable. Despite the tisanes Mary made him he had continued to grow almost visibly, and by the time they reached Mâcon he was a slender adolescent. M. Barnabouni, arriving in response to an urgent summons, was at first sorry for him and murmured sympathetically:

‘The poor lad. His career is ruined. And he was doing so well.’

But when he had measured the dwarf, and found that he had gained nearly two feet, he could not suppress his annoyance.

‘He’s become quite unusable,’ he said. ‘What the devil can one do with a fellow whose only talent was to be two feet three inches high? I ask you! It’s a strange case, certainly, but I’m blessed if I see how we can make anything out of it. One would have to be able to show him “before and after”. If he’d grown a second head or an elephant’s trunk or anything at all original there would be no problem. But you can’t make an act out of a sudden gain in height. The whole thing is really most upsetting. What am I to put in your place tonight, Dwarf? . . . And there I go, you see, still calling you “Dwarf” when I ought to give you your proper name, Valentin Duranton.’

‘Is my name really Valentin Duranton?’ asked the ex-dwarf.

'I'm not quite sure. Either Duranton or Durandard, unless it was just plain Durant, or even Duval. I've no means of checking. But at least I can promise you that your Christian name is Valentin.'

M. Barnaboum gave Mary strict orders not to spread the news abroad. He was afraid it might have a disturbing effect upon other members of the company—upon the 'phenomena', such as the Bearded Lady and the Armless Juggler, who might be caused by it to take a melancholy view of their own peculiar state, or on the other hand might be encouraged in unreasonable hopes which would have a bad effect on their work. It was agreed that they would say that the dwarf was so ill that he had to stay in bed and could not receive visitors. Before leaving the caravan M. Barnaboum measured him again and found that he had grown another inch during the interview.

'He's certainly shooting up fast, upon my word! If he goes on like this he may end by turning into a quite presentable giant, but it's no use counting on it. In the meantime it's clear that he can't stay in that bed much longer. He ought to be sitting in a chair. And seeing he hasn't any clothes to fit him you'd better fetch that grey suit with the purple stripe out of my wardrobe, the one I gave up wearing last year because it got too tight round the waist.'

By eight o'clock that evening Valentin knew that the crisis was past. He was now five feet eleven inches tall, and lacking in none of the attributes of a very good-looking man. Old Mary could not take her eyes off him and with hands clasped in admiration praised the silky moustache and handsome beard which lent such distinction to his youthful countenance, and the broad shoulders and muscular frame which did more than justice to M. Barnaboum's suit.

'Walk a few steps, Dwarf—I should say, M. Valentin. Walk up and down and let me look at you. Such a figure!

Such elegance! The way you sway your hips and shoulders! Upon my word, you're better built than M. Janido, the acrobat, and I do not believe that even M. Barnaboum bore himself with such pride and dignity when he was twenty-five!

Valentin received these compliments with pleasure, but he was listening rather absently, for there were other matters to engage his astonished interest. Objects, for example, which he had hitherto found extremely heavy—his big picture-book, the hurricane-lamp, the jug of water—now weighed almost nothing in his hands, and he felt in his limbs and body energies for which he vainly sought an outlet in that caravan where everything was on a reduced scale. The same was true of all the thoughts and notions which, until the previous evening, had occupied his dwarf's mind and spirit: he perceived now that these were not sufficient for him, and whenever he opened his mouth to speak he had a sense that something was lacking. His own perceptions, and Mary's words, brought constant new discoveries that filled him with wonderment. And sometimes an uncertain intuition led him upon false trails, although he had some inkling of his error. As Mary approached him to straighten his tie he took her hand and uttered words which he recalled from having heard them spoken many times in other circumstances.

'How can you expect me not to find you enchanting? Your eyes have the deep, tender glow of summer evenings. Nothing could be more sweet than the smile of your mutinous mouth, and your movements are like the flight of a bird. He who finds the secret way to your heart will be a thousand times blessed; but let him be accursed if the man is not I!'

The first words caused Mary some surprise, but she very quickly accepted the notion that she could still be addressed in these terms. She smiled with her mutinous mouth, made a bird-flight gesture and sighed with her hand to her heart:

'Ah, Monsieur Valentin, you have grown even more in spirit than in body, and I do not believe anyone could resist



so much charm I cannot be cruel to you, M. Valentin, and indeed it is not in my nature to——'

But here her admirer burst out laughing without knowing why, and she realised at once that she had been led astray by a pretty speech

'I'm an old goose,' she said smiling 'But you're going at a great pace, Monsieur Valentin, to be teasing a poor woman already!'

At the commencement of the performance that evening M. Barnaboum paid a brief visit to the caravan, in a great hurry as usual. He failed to recognise Valentin and mistook him for a doctor called in by Mary

'Well, Doctor, and how's your patient?'

'I'm not the doctor,' said Valentin 'I'm the sufferer—the dwarf'

'Don't you recognise your grey suit with the purple stripe?' cried Mary

M. Barnaboum's eyes opened wide, but he was not a man to be astonished by anything for long

'A devilish good-looking young chap!' he remarked 'I'm not surprised my suit fits him so well'

'And so intelligent, M. Barnaboum—you'd scarcely credit it!'

'Marv is exaggerating a little,' said Valentin with a blush

'H'm Well, in any case it's an odd thing that has happened to you, my friend, and I still don't know what to do about it. Meanwhile you can't stay suffocating in this caravan. Come out for a stroll. I'll say you're a relation of mine'

Had he not been in the company of M. Barnaboum, Valentin would no doubt have indulged in various eccentricities when he got outside, such as testing the strength of his new legs by running at full speed round the circus, or shouting and singing at the top of his voice.

'Life is a wonderful thing,' he exclaimed 'I didn't know it

yesterday. And how big the world appears when you see it from higher up!

'Very likely,' replied M. Barnaboum. 'But there isn't as much room in it as you might think at first glance. It may not be long before you find that out for yourself.'

They presently encountered the Thin Man as he was leaving his caravan. He came towards them, and being by nature disposed to melancholy gazed without favour at the stalwart young man with a glowing face who was walking beside the owner.

'How is the dwarf?' he asked.

'Not good at all,' answered M. Barnaboum. 'The doctor saw him a little while ago, and he's had him taken to hospital.'

'Which amounts to saying he's done for,' said Valentin with a jovial bluntness.

The Thin Man wiped away a tear.

'I shall never have a better comrade,' he said. 'He was so small that there was no room in him for malice. He was gentle and confiding. When he put his little hand in mine, as we went into the ring, I cannot tell you how happy it made me.'

Valentin was touched. He wanted to tell the Thin Man that he was the dwarf and that almost nothing was changed; but at the same time he feared to diminish himself by avowing his former dimensions. The Thin Man gave him a hostile glance and went off sniffing. M. Barnaboum said:

'You had friends, you see.'

'I shall find new ones.'

'No doubt you will. But that was a true friend who had nothing to expect of you.'

'And nothing to fear, either, Monsieur Barnaboum.'

'You are right, Monsieur Valentin, and so is Mary when she says that you have gained greatly in intelligence.'

Together they entered the circus tent, and M. Barnaboum was obliged constantly to repeat the story that the dwarf had been taken to hospital and would appear no more with the

company. All his questioners wiped away a tear and uttered words of grief. M. Loyal the ringmaster, Pataclac the clown, Janido the acrobat and his three brothers, Mlle Primevère the tightrope dancer, Julius the lion-tamer, the Japanese jugglers and, in short, all the artistes in the great circus declared, sighing, that they had lost a dear friend. Even the elephant waved his trunk in an uncustomary manner that showed him to be unhappy. But no one paid any attention to Valentin, although M. Barnaboum introduced him as his cousin. He might not have existed, and he kept silent, seeming to be a stranger to this general sorrow of which he was the cause. Surprised and shocked that no one took notice of him, he begrudged the dwarf the large place he had held in their hearts.

In the ring the Thin Man performed evolutions of a wonderful dexterity, twining himself round a post, passing through the eye of a needle and tying a double knot in his legs. Valentin listened with a twinge of envy to the murmurs of astonishment that arose from the audience. He, too, had known the plaudits of the crowd, and what was more, he hoped to know them again. This youthfulness of body and spirit, the many perfections that he now felt himself to possess, how could the public fail to admire them?

Wearying at length of the performance, and impatient to discover the world, he directed his steps towards the streets of the town. Happy to have rid himself of the dwarf, rejoicing in his strength and freedom, he strode exalted over the pavements. But his intoxication was short-lived. The people in the streets showed no more interest in him than in any other among themselves. Still not fully realising that his new condition had made him a man like other men, he reflected that in the past, when old Mary or the Thin Man had taken him out into a town where they were to perform, all heads had turned to stare at him.

'I have grown big,' he sighed, 'and now nothing at all

happens to me. One might suppose that the world was only made for dwarfs.'

Before long the spectacle afforded by the town began to seem to him one of extreme monotony. Never had he felt so lonely. There were not many people about, the streets were drab and poorly lighted, and as he pictured the dazzling lights of Barnaboum's Circus he began to wish he had never left it. To relieve his loneliness he went into a café and asked for a glass of beer at the counter, as he had seen the Thin Man do. The café-keeper, yawning as he looked at the clock, said casually:

'So you didn't go to the circus?'

'I hadn't time. Nor you either?'

'Not a chance. Someone has to stay here and look after the place.'

'In fact,' said Valentin, 'you don't have much of a life, do you?'

'What!' exclaimed the café-keeper. 'Why, I'm the happiest of men! I wouldn't want to boast, but . . .'

He went on to describe his daily occupations. Valentin did not venture to express an opinion, but it seemed to him that happiness must be a singularly tedious business if one had not the good fortune to belong to a company of celebrated performers. In his ignorance of custom, he left without paying for his beer and returned to the circus.

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Wandering round by the stables he came upon Mademoiselle Germina seated on a stool while one of the stable-boys was harnessing her horse. He paused for a moment to gaze at her without being seen, and discovered new reasons for admiring her. He was now less interested in the brightness of her gauze scarf and the pink and black pattern of her costume than in the slimness of her waist, the modelling of knee and thigh, the slender grace of her neck and a certain mysterious something impossible of definition for one

uninstructed in the wonders of sex. He reflected, trembling a little, that only the previous evening he had sat on her knee and rested his head against the soft swelling of the velvet corsage. Memory to some extent betrayed him, for he thought that it was not his dwarf's head that had lain against the black velvet, but his fine new head with its handsome beard and silky moustache; nevertheless, he did perceive that he could no longer sit on Mlle Germina's knee. He was too big and heavy.

'My name is Valentin,' he said as he drew near her.

'I think I saw you a little while ago, Monsieur. I understand that you are a relation of M Barnaboum. You find me in great distress, for I have just heard that my little friend, the dwarf, is in hospital.'

'That doesn't matter. . . . You know, I think you're very pretty. I like your fair hair and your dark eyes and your nose and mouth. I want to kiss you.'

Mlle Germina frowned, and Valentin was alarmed.

'I didn't mean to make you cross,' he said, 'And I won't kiss you until you ask me. But I do think you're beautiful. Your face and neck and shoulders are as perfect as they can be. So is your bosom. Perhaps people don't notice bosoms very much, but I do. I think they're very interesting. Yours'

In his innocence he reached out with both hands, not knowing that he was about to commit a dreadful act strictly forbidden by the rules of polite behaviour. Mlle Germina told him indignantly that it was no way to treat a respectable girl, and that although she was but a poor circus performer, she had her pride. Not knowing what to say in self-defence, he fell back haphazard upon certain flowers of speech that he had heard many times on the lips of Pataclac and the Janimo brothers.

'I shall go mad with love,' he sighed. 'Exquisite creature, why have my senses been ravished by your golden hair, your

velvet gaze and the grace and suppleness of your enchanting form?’

Approving of this eloquence she showed a greater readiness to listen, and he went on:

‘How can I persuade you that my only desire is to lay at your feet a fortune worthy of your beauty?’

At this she smiled graciously; but M. Barnaboum came along at that moment, just in time to hear the last words.

‘Don’t you pay any attention to him,’ he said. ‘This young fellow hasn’t got any fortune at all, not a bean. He’s an even bigger liar than Pataclac, who does at least possess a very pretty talent as a clown.’

‘I have a very pretty talent, too,’ said Valentin, ‘and the public has been generous in applauding me.’

‘Why, what do you do?’ asked Mlle Germina.

M. Barnaboum hastily changed the subject and presently led Valentin outside.

‘Suppose we have a bit of a talk about this talent of yours,’ he said when they were alone. ‘The fact is, my lad, you’ve done for it. Try going into the ring the way you are now, and see how much applause you’ll get! You’ve turned yourself into a good-looking type, I’m not denying, but if you ask me it’s a proper come-down seeing that when you were only two foot three you were a credit to the outfit. And now you’re starting to make up to the girls without so much as knowing how you’re going to earn a living. Have you given it even a minute’s thought?’

‘Earn a living?’ repeated Valentin.

Realising that as yet he understood nothing of the facts of life, M. Barnaboum set about educating him. He explained the use of money and the difficulty honest men have in getting hold of it, and he also gave him a rough outline of what is meant by the pleasures of love. Valentin grasped it all with a marvellous facility. Only in the matter of love did he feel slight misgivings.

'Do you think Mlle Germina will consent to marry me?'

'Most decidedly not,' said M Barnaboum 'She's got too much sense If you were a great artiste it might be different '

For love of Mlle Germina, and because he now realised that everyone has to do something in life, unless they happen to be a dwarf or an elephant, Valentin decided that he would become a great artiste In consideration of his past services M Barnaboum undertook to bear the cost of his apprenticeship The first thing was to decide what line he should adopt He could not hope to become a trapeze-artist or an acrobat since these called not only for especial aptitudes but also for an elasticity and resourcefulness of limb which a fully grown man could not acquire So for a start he went to school with Pataclac but after a few hours' trial the clown good-humouredly assured him that he had nothing to hope for in this direction

'You'll never make even a child laugh,' he said 'If you ask me, you're too rational in mind and manner to astonish the public with anything unexpected You do things the way you think about them, and the way you think about them is the way they're supposed to be done That isn't to say that a clown should be lacking in good sense, far from it, but with us we put good sense in a place where you don't expect to find it, in a grimace or a movement of the big toe It's a thing you understand by instinct if you've a taste for it, but it's only a waste of time for a man like you to try to be a clown '

Regretfully accepting Pataclac's verdict, Valentin turned to jugglery under the two Japanese By the time they reached Joigny he had learnt to juggle passably well with two wooden balls, but he knew that he would never get much farther, and in any case the business did not greatly appeal to him He had a sense of cheating natural laws of which he fully approved.

He essayed other apprenticeships, but with no more success. He had some aptitude for most things, but nothing out of the ordinary. When he tried to ride a horse he did as well as a captain of gendarmerie, and M. Barnaboum conceded that he had a good seat. But this was not enough. Something more was needed by anyone aspiring to be an artiste.

Valentin was so discouraged by his many failures that he could no longer bear to watch the performance, and the towns through which they passed seemed to him as depressing as the one into which he had first ventured alone. He spent his evenings with Mary, who still knew how to console him, preferring her company to that of any other person.

'Never you fear,' she said, 'it will all come right in the end. You'll be a great artiste like M. Janido or M. Pataclac. Or perhaps you'll turn into a dwarf again, which would be a very good thing, although I'm bound to say you look handsomer as you are. You'll be a dwarf, and you'll sleep in your little dwarf's bed and old Mary will tuck you up at nights.'

'And Mlle Germina?'

'She'll take you on her knee just as she used to do.'

'And then?'

'And then she'll kiss you on the forehead.'

'And then? . . . Ah, Mary, you don't know. I never want to be a dwarf again.'

It was nearly a month after Valentin had grown that the circus reached Paris and set up its tents at the Porte de Vincennes. On the opening night the benches were packed, and M. Barnaboum supervised the performance with especial care. Valentin stood outside the ring among the uniformed attendants and performers waiting to make their entrance. He had lost all hope of achieving success as an artiste, his latest attempt, with M. Julius the lion-tamer, having failed like the others. He was too level-headed to be able to enter



the lions' cage without serious risk of injury. He lacked that bodily instinct which anticipates danger, and which neither courage nor coolness can replace. M. Julius reproached him with being too sensible to face the lions.

Valentin watched Mlle Germuna as she galloped round the ring. Standing on her horse with her arms outstretched to the crowd, she was smiling in acknowledgement of the applause, and he thought sadly that not one of her smiles was for him. He felt oppressed and ashamed of his solitude. He had seen most of his friends in the company enter the ring—Pataclac, the Janido brothers, Mlle Primevère the tight rope dancer, the Thin Man and the jugglers—and for him each of their acts recalled a failure.

'It's all over,' he sighed. 'I shall never enter the ring again. There is no place for me any more in Barnaboum's Circus.'

Looking out over the audience he saw, some distance off, an empty place behind an upright that hindered the view. He went and sat there, and almost at once his sadness left him. The people around him were talking about the bareback-rider, exclaiming at her grace and skill, and he joined with them in praising her. Forgetting that he was Valentin he merged with the crowd and applauded without knowing that he did so.

'Look how she's smiling at us!' he murmured with the rest.

When the performance was over he let himself be swept with the tide of spectators towards the exit. He thought no longer of an artiste's career, and no more felt the need to be applauded. He was happy instead to be a part of this great company, no longer wholly responsible for himself. M. Barnaboum, who had seen him take his seat, continued to watch him for a long time until he was swallowed up in the crowd, a point like all the other points, and then he said to M. Loyal, who was standing beside him:

'By the way, M. Loyal, I don't think I told you—the dwarf is dead.'

## *The State of Grace*

IN THE year 1939 the best Christian in the Rue Gabrielle, and indeed in all Montmartre, was a certain Monsieur Duperrier, a man of such piety, uprightness and charity that God, without awaiting his death, and while he was still in the prime of life, crowned his head with a halo which never left it by day or by night. Like those in Paradise this halo, although made of some immaterial substance, manifested itself in the form of a whitish ring which looked as though it might have been cut out of fairly stiff cardboard, and shed a tender light. M. Duperrier wore it gratefully, with devout thanks to Heaven for a distinction which, however, his modesty did not permit him to regard as a formal undertaking in respect of the hereafter. He would have been unquestionably the happiest of men had his wife, instead of rejoicing in this signal mark of the Divine approval, not received it with outspoken resentment and exasperation.

'Well really, upon my word,' the lady said, 'what do you think you look like going round in a thing like that, and what do you suppose the neighbours and the tradespeople will say, not to mention my cousin Léopold? I never in my life saw anything so ridiculous. You'll have the whole neighbourhood talking.'

Mme Duperrier was an admirable woman, of outstanding piety and impeccable conduct, but she had not yet understood the vanity of the things of this world. Like so many people whose aspirations to virtue are marred by a certain lack of logic, she thought it more important to be esteemed by her concierge than by her Creator. Her terror lest she should be questioned on the subject of the halo by one of the neighbours

or by the milkman had from the very outset an embittering effect upon her. She made repeated attempts to snatch away the shimmering plate of light that adorned her husband's cranium, but with no more effect than if she had tried to grasp a sunbeam, and without altering its position by a hair's-breadth. Girdling the top of his forehead where the hair began, the halo hung low over the back of his neck, with a slight tilt which gave it a coquettish look.

The foretaste of beatitude did not cause Duperrier to overlook the consideration he owed to his wife's peace of mind. He himself possessed too great a sense of discretion and modesty not to perceive that there were grounds for her disquiet. The gifts of God, especially when they wear a somewhat gratuitous aspect, are seldom accorded the respect they deserve, and the world is all too ready to find in them a subject of malicious gossip. Duperrier did his utmost, so far as the thing was possible, to make himself at all times inconspicuous. Regretfully putting aside the bowler hat which he had hitherto regarded as an indispensable attribute of his accountant's calling, he took to wearing a large felt hat, light in colour, of which the wide brim exactly covered the halo provided he wore it rakishly on the back of his head. Thus clad, there was nothing startlingly out-of-the-way in his appearance to attract the attention of the passer-by. The brim of his hat merely had a slight phosphorescence which by daylight might pass for the sheen on the surface of smooth felt. During office hours he was equally successful in avoiding the notice of his employer and fellow-workers. His desk, in the small shoe factory in Ménilmontant where he kept the books, was situated in a glass-paned cubby-hole between two workshops, and his state of isolation saved him from awkward questions. He wore the hat all day, and no one was sufficiently interested to ask him why he did so.

But these precautions did not suffice to allay his wife's misgivings. It seemed to her that the halo must already be a

subject of comment among the ladies of the district, and she went almost furtively about the streets adjoining the Rue Gabrielle, her buttocks contracted and her heart wrung with agonising suspicions, convinced that she heard the echo of mocking laughter as she passed. To this worthy woman who had never had any ambition other than to keep her place in a social sphere ruled by the cult of the absolute norm, the glaring eccentricity with which her husband had been afflicted rapidly assumed catastrophic proportions. Its very improbability made it monstrous. Nothing would have induced her to accompany him out of doors. The evenings and Sunday afternoons which they had previously devoted to small outings and visits to friends were now passed in a solitary intimacy which became daily more oppressive. In the living-room of light oak where between meals the long leisure hours dragged by, Mme Duperrier, unable to knit a single stitch, would sit bitterly contemplating the halo, while Duperrier, generally reading some work of devotion and feeling the brush of angels' wings, wore an expression of beatific rapture which added to her fury. From time to time, however, he would glance solicitously at her, and noting the expression of angry disapproval on her face would feel a regret which was incompatible with the gratitude he owed to Heaven, so that this in its turn inspired him with a feeling of remorse at one remove.

So painful a state of affairs could not long continue without imperilling the unhappy woman's mental equilibrium. She began presently to complain that the light of the halo, bathing the pillows, made it impossible for her to sleep at nights. Duperrier, who sometimes made use of the divine illumination to read a chapter of the Scriptures, was obliged to concede the justice of this grievance, and he began to be afflicted with a sense of guilt. Finally, certain events, highly deplorable in their consequences, transformed this state of unease into one of acute crisis.

Upon setting out for the office one morning, Duperrier passed a funeral in the Rue Gabrielle, within a few yards of their house. He had become accustomed, outrageous though it was to his natural sense of courtesy, to greet acquaintances by merely raising a hand to his hat, but being thus confronted by the near presence of the dead he decided, after thinking the matter over, that nothing could relieve him of the obligation to uncover himself entirely. Several shopkeepers, yawning in their doorways, blinked at the sight of the halo, and gathered together to discuss the phenomenon. When she came out to do her shopping Mme Duperrier was assailed with questions, and in a state of extreme agitation uttered denials whose very vehemence appeared suspect. Upon his return home at mid-day her husband found her in a state of nervous crisis which caused him to fear for her reason.

"Take off that halo!" she cried. "Take it off instantly! I never want to see it again!"

Duperrier gently reminded her that it was not in his power to remove it, whereupon she cried still more loudly.

"If you had any consideration for me you'd find some way of getting rid of it. You're simply selfish, that's what you are!"

These words, to which he prudently made no reply, gave Duperrier much food for thought. And on the following day a second incident occurred to point to the inevitable conclusion. Duperrier never missed early morning Mass, and since he had become endowed with the odour of sanctity he had taken to hearing it at the Basilica of the Sacré-Cœur. Here he was obliged to remove his hat, but the church is a large one and at that hour of the morning the congregation was sufficiently sparse to make it a simple matter for him to hide behind a pillar. On this particular occasion, however, he must have been less circumspect than usual. As he was leaving the church after the service an elderly spinster flung herself at his feet crying, "St. Joseph! St. Joseph!", and kissed the hem of his overcoat. Duperrier beat a hasty retreat, flattered but

considerably put out at recognising his adorer, who lived only a few doors away. A few hours later the devoted creature burst into the apartment, where Mme Duperrier was alone, uttering cries of—‘St. Joseph! I want to see St. Joseph!’

Although somewhat lacking in brilliant and picturesque qualities, St. Joseph is nevertheless an excellent saint: but his unsensational merits, with their flavour of solid craftsmanship and passive goodwill, seem to have brought upon him some degree of injustice. There are indeed persons, some of the utmost piety, who, without even being conscious of it, associate the notion of naïve complaisance with the part he played in the Nativity. This impression of simple-mindedness is further enhanced by the habit of super-imposing upon the figure of the saint the recollection of that other Joseph who resisted the advances of Potiphar’s wife. Mme Duperrier had no great respect for the presumed sanctity of her husband, but this fervour of adoration which with loud cries invoked him by the name of St. Joseph seemed to her to add the finishing touch to his shame and absurdity. Goaded into a state of almost demented fury, she chased the visitor out of the apartment with an umbrella and then smashed several piles of plates. Her first act upon her husband’s return was to have hysterics, and when finally she had regained her self-control she said in a decided voice:

‘For the last time I ask you to get rid of that halo. You can do it if you choose. You know you can.’

Duperrier hung his head, not daring to ask how she thought he should go about it, and she went on:

‘It’s perfectly simple. You only have to sin.’

Uttering no word of protest, Duperrier withdrew to the bedroom to pray.

‘Almighty God,’ he said in substance, ‘you have granted me the highest reward that man may hope for upon earth, excepting martyrdom. I thank you, Lord, but I am married and I share with my wife the bread of tribulation which you

deign to send us, no less than the honey of your favour. Only thus can a devout couple hope to walk in your footsteps. And it so happens that my wife cannot endure the sight or even the thought of my halo, not at all because it is a gift bestowed by Heaven but simply because it's a halo. You know what women are. When some unaccustomed happening does not chance to kindle their enthusiasm it is likely to upset all the store of rules and harmonies which they keep lodged in their little heads. No one can prevent this, and though my wife should live to be a hundred there will never be any place for my halo in her scheme of things. Oh God, you who see into my heart, you know how little store I set by my personal tranquillity and the evening slippers by the fireside. For the rapture of wearing upon my head the token of your goodwill I would gladly suffer even the most violent domestic upheavals. But, alas, it is not my own peace of mind that is imperilled. My wife is losing all taste for life. Worse still, I can see the day approaching when her hatred of my halo will cause her to revile Him who bestowed it upon me. Am I to allow the life-companion you chose for me to die and damn her soul for all eternity without making an effort to save her? I find myself today at the parting of the ways, and the safe road does not appear to me to be the more merciful. That your spirit of infinite justice may talk to me with the voice of my conscience is the prayer which in this hour of my perplexity I lay at your radiant feet, oh Lord.'

Scarcely had Duperrier concluded this prayer than his conscience declared itself in favour of the way of sin, making of this an act of duty demanded by Christian charity. He returned to the living-room, where his wife awaited him, grinding her teeth.

'God is just,' he said, with his thumbs in the armholes of his waistcoat. 'He knew what he was doing when he gave me my halo. The truth is that I deserve it more than any man

alive. They don't make men like me in these days. When I reflect upon the vileness of the human herd and then consider the manifold perfections embodied in myself I am tempted to spit in the faces of the people in the street. God has rewarded me, it is true, but if the Church had any regard for justice I should be an archbishop at the very least.'

Duperrier had chosen the sin of pride, which enabled him, while exalting his own merits, in the same breath to praise God, who had singled him out. His wife was not slow to realise that he was sinning deliberately and at once entered into the spirit of the thing.

'My angel,' she said, 'you will never know how proud I am of you. My cousin Léopold, with his car and his villa at Vesinet, is not worthy to unloose the latchet of your shoe.'

'That is precisely my own opinion. If I had chosen to concern myself with sordid matters I could have amassed a fortune as easily as any man, and a much bigger one than Léopold's, but I chose to follow a different road and my triumph is of another kind. I despise his money as I despise the man himself and all the countless other half-wits who are incapable of perceiving the grandeur of my modest existence. They have eyes and see not.'

The utterance of sentiments such as these, spoken at first from half-closed lips, his heart rent with shame, became within a short time a simple matter for Duperrier, a habit costing him no effort at all. And such is the power of words over the human mind, that it was not long before he accepted them as valid currency. His wife, however, anxiously watching the halo, and seeing that its lustre showed no sign of diminishing, began to suspect that her husband's sin was lacking in weight and substance. Duperrier readily agreed with this.

'Nothing could be more true,' he said. 'I thought I was giving way to pride when in fact I was merely expressing the



most simple and obvious of truths. When a man has attained to the uttermost degree of perfection, as I have done, the word "pride" ceases to have any meaning.'

This did not prevent him from continuing to extol his merits, but at the same time he recognised the necessity for embarking upon some other form of sin. It appeared to him that gluttony was, of the Deadly Sins, the one most suited to his purpose, which was to rid himself of the halo without too far forfeiting the goodwill of Heaven. He was supported in this conclusion by the recollection, from his childhood days, of gentle scoldings for excessive indulgence in jam or chocolate. Filled with hope his wife set about the preparation of rich dishes whose variety enhanced their savour. The Duperriers' dinner-table was loaded with game, pâté, river-trout, lobster, sweets, pastries and vintage wines. Their meals lasted twice as long as hitherto, if not three times. Nothing could have been more hideous and revolting than the spectacle of Duperrier, his napkin tied round his neck, his face crimson and his eyes glazed with satiation, loading his plate with a third helping, washing down roast and stuffing with great gulps of claret, belching, dribbling sauce and gravy, and perspiring freely under his halo. Before long he had developed such a taste for good cooking and rich repasts that he frequently rebuked his wife for an over-cooked joint or an unsuccessful mayonnaise. One evening, annoyed by his incessant grumbling, she said sharply

'Your halo seems to be flourishing. Anyone would think it was growing fat on my cooking, just as you are. It looks to me as though gluttony isn't a sin after all. The only thing against it is that it costs money, and I can see no reason why I shouldn't put you back on vegetable soup and spaghetti.'

'That's enough of that!' roared Duperrier. 'Put me back on vegetable soup and spaghetti, will you? By God, I'd like to see you try! Do you think I don't know what I'm doing? Put me back on spaghetti, indeed! The insolence! Here am I,

wallowing in sin just to oblige you, and that's the way you talk. Don't let me hear another word. It would serve you right if I slapped your face.

One sin leads to another, in short, and thwarted greed, no less than pride, promotes anger. Duperrier allowed himself to fall into this new sin without really knowing whether he was doing it for his wife's sake or because he enjoyed it. This man who had hitherto been distinguished by the gentleness and equability of his nature now became given to thunderous rages; he smashed the crockery and on occasions went so far as to strike his wife. He even swore, invoking the name of his Creator. But his outbursts, growing steadily more frequent, did not save him from being both arrogant and gluttonous. He was, in fact, now sinning in three different ways, and Mme Duperrier mused darkly on God's infinite indulgence.

The fact is that the noblest of virtues can continue to flourish in a soul sullied by sin. Proud, gluttonous and choleric, Duperrier nevertheless remained steeped in Christian charity, nor had he lost anything of his lofty sense of duty as a man and a husband. Finding that Heaven remained unmoved by his anger, he resolved to be envious as well. To tell the truth, without his knowing it, envy had already crept into his soul. Rich feeding, which puts a burden on the liver, and pride, which stirs the sense of injustice, may dispose even the best of men to envy his neighbour. And anger lent a note of hatred to Duperrier's envy. He became jealous of his relations, his friends, his employer, the shopkeepers of the neighbourhood and even the stars of sport and screen whose photographs appeared in the papers. Everything infuriated him, and he was known to tremble with ignoble rage at the thought that the people next door possessed a cutlery service with silver handles, whereas his own were only of bone. But the halo continued to glow with undiminished brightness. Instead of being dismayed by this, he concluded that his

sins were lacking in reality, and he had no difficulty in reasoning that his supposed gluttony did not in fact exceed the natural demands of a healthy appetite, while his anger and his envy merely bore witness to a lofty craving for justice. It was the halo itself, however, which furnished him with the most solid arguments.

'I'm bound to say I would have expected Heaven to be a little more fussy,' his wife said. 'If all your gluttony and boasting and brutality and malice have done nothing to dim your halo, it doesn't look as though I need worry about *my* place in Paradise.'

'Hold your jaw!' roared the furious man. 'How much longer have I got to listen to your nagging? I'm fed up with it. You think it funny, do you, that a saintly character like myself should have to plunge into sin for the sake of your blasted peace of mind? Stow it, d'you hear me?'

The tone of these replies was clearly lacking in that suavity which may rightly be looked for in a man enhaloed by the glory of God. Since he had entered upon the paths of sin Duperrier had become increasingly given to strong language. His formerly ascetic countenance was becoming bloated with rich food. Not only was his vocabulary growing coarse, but a similar vulgarity was invading his thoughts. His vision of Paradise, for example, had undergone a notable transformation. Instead of appearing to him as a symphony of souls in robes of cellophane, the dwelling-place of the elect came to look more and more like a vast dining-room. Mme Duperrier did not fail to observe the changes that were overtaking her husband and even to feel some anxiety for the future. Nevertheless, the thought of his possible descent into the abyss still did not outweigh in her mind the horror of singularity. Rather than an enhaloed Duperrier she would have preferred a husband who was an atheist, a debauchee and as crude of speech as her cousin Léopold. At least she would not then have to blush for him before the milkman.

No especial decision was called for on the part of Duperrier for him to lapse into the sin of sloth. The arrogant belief that he was required at the office to perform tasks unworthy of his merits, together with the drowsiness caused by heavy eating and drinking, made him naturally disposed to be idle; and since he had sufficient conceit to believe that he must excel in all things, even the worst, he very soon became a model of indolence. The day his indignant employer sacked him, he received the sentence with his hat in his hand.

‘What’s that on your head?’ his employer asked.

‘A halo,’ said Duperrier.

‘Is it indeed? And I suppose that’s what you’ve been fooling around with when you were supposed to be working?’

When he told his wife of his dismissal, she asked him what he intended to do next.

‘It seems to me that this would be a good moment to try the sin of avarice,’ he answered gaily.

Of all the Deadly Sins, avarice was the one that called for the greatest effort of willpower on his part. To those not born avaricious it is the vice offering the fewest easy allurements, and when it is adopted on principle there is nothing to distinguish it, at least in the early stages, from that most sterling of all virtues, thrift. Duperrier subjected himself to severe disciplines, such as confining himself to gluttony, and thus succeeded in gaining a solid reputation for avarice among his friends and acquaintances. He really liked money for its own sake, and was better able than most people to experience the malicious thrill which misers feel at the thought that they control a source of creative energy and prevent it from functioning. Counting up his savings, the fruit of a hitherto laborious existence, he came by degrees to know the hideous pleasure of harming others by damming a current of exchange and of life. This outcome, simply because it was painfully achieved, filled Mme Duperrier with hope. Her

husband had yielded so easily to the seductions of the other sins that God, she thought, could not condemn him very severely for an innocent, animal surrender which made him appear rather a victim deserving of compassion. His deliberate and patient progress along the road of avarice, on the other hand, could only be the fruit of a perverse desire which was like a direct challenge to Heaven. Nevertheless, although Duperrier became miserly to the point of putting trouser-buttons in the collection-bag, the brilliance and size of the halo remained unimpaired. This new setback, duly noted, plunged husband and wife into despair.

Proud, gluttonous, angry, envious, slothful and avaricious, Duperrier felt that his soul was still perfumed with innocence. Deadly though they were, the six sins he had thus far practised were nevertheless such as a first communicant may confess to without despairing. The deadliest of all, lust, filled him with horror. The others, it seemed to him, might be said to exist almost outside the sphere of God's notice. In the case of each, sin or peccadillo, it all depended on the size of the dose. But lust, the sin of the flesh, meant unqualified acceptance of the Devil's work. The enchantments of the night were a foretaste of the burning shades of Hell, the darting tongues were like the flames of eternity, the moans of ecstasy, the writhing bodies, these did but herald the wailing of the damned and the convulsions of flesh racked by endless torment. Duperrier had not deliberately reserved the sin of the flesh to the last: he had simply refused to contemplate it. Mme Duperrier herself could not think of it without disquiet. For many years the pair had lived in a state of delicious chastity, their nightly rest attended, until the coming of the halo, by dreams as pure as the driven snow. As she thought of it, the recollection of those years of continence was a source of considerable annoyance to Mme Duperrier, for she did not doubt that the halo was the result. Plainly that lily-white nimbus could be undone by lust alone.

Duperrier, after obstinately resisting his wife's persuasions, at length allowed himself to be overborne. Once again his sense of duty cast out fear. Having reached the decision he was embarrassed by his ignorance; but his wife, who thought of everything, bought him a revolting book in which all the essentials were set forth in the form of plain and simple instruction. The night-time spectacle of that saintly man, the halo encircling his head, reading a chapter of the abominable work to his wife, was a poignant one indeed. Often his voice trembled at some infamous word or some image more hideously evocative than the rest. Having thus achieved a theoretical mastery of the subject, he still delayed while he considered whether this last sin should be consummated in domestic intimacy or elsewhere. Mme Duperrier took the view that it should all be done at home, adducing reasons of economy which did not fail to weigh with him; but having considered all the pros and cons he concluded that he had no need to involve her in vile practices which might be prejudicial to her own salvation. As a loyal husband he valiantly resolved that he alone should run the risks.

Thereafter Duperrier spent most of his nights in disreputable hotels where he pursued his initiation in company with the professionals of the quarter. The halo, which he could not conceal from these wretched associates, led to his finding himself in various odd situations, sometimes embarrassing and sometimes advantageous. In the beginning, owing to his anxiety to conform to the instructions in his manual, he sinned with little exaltation but rather with the methodical application of a dancer learning a new step or figure of choreography. However, the desire for perfection to which his pride impelled him soon achieved its lamentable reward in the notoriety which he gained among the women with whom he consorted. Although he came to take the liveliest pleasure in these pursuits, Duperrier nevertheless found them expensive and was cruelly afflicted in his avarice.

One evening on the Place Pigalle he made the acquaintance of a creature twenty years of age, already a lost soul, whose name was Marie-Jannick. It was for her, so it is believed, that the poet Maurice Fombeure wrote the charming lines:

*C'est Marie-Jannick  
De Landivisiau  
Qui tue les moustiques  
Avec son sabot.*

Marie-Jannick had come from Brittany six months previously to go into service as maid-of-all-work in the home of a municipal councillor who was both a socialist and an atheist. Finding herself unable to endure the life of this godless household, she had given notice and was now courageously earning her living on the Boulevard de Clichy. As was to be expected, the halo made a deep impression on that little religious soul. To Marie-Jannick, Duperrier seemed the equal of St. Yves and St. Ronan, and he, on his side, was not slow to perceive the influence he had over her and to turn it to profit.

Thus it is ~~that~~ on this very day, the 22nd February of the year 1944, amid the darkness of winter and of war, Marie-Jannick, who will shortly be twenty-five, may be seen walking her beat on the Boulevard de Clichy. During the black-out hours the stroller between the Place Pigalle and the Rue des Martyrs may be startled to observe, floating and swaying in the darkness, a mysterious circle of light that looks rather like a ring of Saturn. It is Duperrier, his head adorned with the glorious halo which he no longer seeks to conceal from the curiosity of all and sundry; Duperrier, burdened with the weight of the seven Deadly Sins, who, lost to all shame, supervises the labours of Marie-Jannick, administering a smart kick in the pants when her zeal flags, and waiting at

the hotel door to count her takings by the light of the halo. But from the depths of his degradation, through the dark night of his conscience, a murmur yet rises from time to time to his lips, a prayer of thanksgiving for the absolute gratuity of the gifts of God.



## *The Seven-League Boots*

GERMAINE BUGE left Mlle Larrisson's apartment after doing two hours' 'thorough cleaning' under the old maid's critical eye. It was four o'clock of a December afternoon, and the temperature had been below freezing-point for two days. Her coat did little to protect her. It was of thin material, a mixture of wool and cotton, and so worn as to be scarcely more than the appearance of a coat. The winter wind blew through it as through a wire grill. Perhaps it also blew through Germaine, who seemed to have not much more substance or reality than the coat itself. She was a faint shadow of a woman with a small, narrow, harassed face, one of those beings whose poverty and unobtrusiveness seem to bear witness to an act of charity on the part of Providence, as though they lived only by reason of the slightness of their demands upon life. Men did not notice her as they passed her in the street, women very rarely. Shopkeepers' did not remember her name, and almost the only people who knew her were those who employed her.

Germaine hurried up the steep part of the Rue Lamarck. As she reached the corner of the Rue Mont-Cenis she met a number of schoolboys running down the slope. But the exodus was only beginning. Outside the school, at the foot of the big, stone stairway which climbs the hill of Montmartre, the released children were still clustered together in a noisy, compact group. Germaine took up her stand at the corner of the Rue Paul-Féval and stood watching for Antoine. Within a few minutes the crowd had dispersed, scattering along the streets, and she was perturbed at not seeing him. Only half a dozen youngsters remained, chattering together

about sport and delaying the moment of separation which would take them all in different directions. Germaine went up and asked if any of them knew Antoine Buge, and if they had seen him. The smallest, who looked about the same age, raised his cap and said:

‘Buge? Yes, I know him. I didn’t see him go, but I know he left one of the first, with Frioulat.’

Germaine waited another minute and then turned away in disappointment, retracing her steps.

Meanwhile Antoine, at the other end of the Rue Paul-Féval, had seen his mother waiting for him. It had given him an uncomfortable and guilty feeling. Indeed, while still hiding among his group of companions he wondered aloud whether he should run after her.

‘You can if you like,’ said Frioulat coldly. ‘Anybody who’s afraid can go home. Only then, of course, you won’t be a member of the gang any more.’

So Antoine stayed. He didn’t want anyone to think he was afraid. And besides, he very much wanted to be a member of the gang, even though their leader was pretty tough with them. Frioulat was wonderful. Although he wasn’t any taller than Antoine, he was strong and quick and never frightened of anything. Once he had even told a man off. Baudin and Rogier had been there; it wasn’t just a story.

The gang, at present composed of five members, was awaiting a sixth, Huchemin, who lived in that street and had gone home to deposit his satchel and those of his comrades.

At length he came back to them, making their number complete. Antoine, still rather unhappy, glanced in the direction of the school, thinking of his mother’s solitary return to their lodging in the Rue Bachelet. Frioulat guessed his thoughts and had the shrewdness to entrust him with a delicate mission.

‘You can go ahead and scout. We’ll see if you’re any good at it. But watch out—it’s dangerous!’

Pink with pride, Antoine went at a run up the Rue des Saules and stopped at the first crossing. Evening was coming on, and the number of people in the street was not large—to be exact, two old women and a stray dog. Antoine returned to the main body and made his report in a formal voice.

‘I wasn’t attacked, but it looks like we might have trouble in the Rue Saint-Vincent.’

‘I thought as much,’ said Frioulat, ‘but I’ve taken precautions. Right, now we’ll start. Everybody in single file behind me, and keep close to the wall. And nobody’s to break ranks without orders, even if I’m attacked.’

Baranquin, a very small, fair-haired boy who was on his first campaign, showed signs of nerves and wanted Antoine to tell him about the dangers which they were shortly to encounter. He was sharply called to order by Frioulat, and took his place in the file without another word. The advance up the Rue des Saules was effected without incident. Several times Frioulat ordered his men to lie flat on the icy pavement, without indicating the nature of the peril that threatened them. He himself remained standing, utterly fearless, like a commander of legend, gazing keenly about him with his hands making binoculars over his eyes. No one ventured to say anything, but the others felt that he was overdoing it a little. As they passed the end of the Rue Cortot he fired two shots from his catapult along it, but did not condescend to explain his reasons. The party came to a halt at the crossing of the Rue Norvins, and Antoine took advantage of the pause to ask what had happened in the Rue Cortot.

‘I haven’t time for talk,’ said Frioulat tersely. ‘I’m responsible for the safety of the expedition.’ And he went on: ‘Baranquin, you’re to reconnoitre as far as the Rue Gabrielle and then report back. At the double.’

It was now nearly dark. By no means reassured, little Baranquin went off at a run, and while they awaited his

return the chief got a piece of paper out of his pocket and studied it with a frown.

'Pipe down, will you?' he said to Huchemin and Rogier, who had ventured to raise their voices. 'Can't you see I'm thinking?'

Presently they heard the patter of Baranquin's goloshes over the pavement as he came scampering back. He had seen nothing suspicious in the course of his patrol, and in all innocence he said so. This disregard of the rules of the game, showing a lack of the true spirit of make-believe, was extremely shocking to Frioulat, who exclaimed bitterly to the others:

'I've been commanding troops all my life, but I've never known a bonehead like this one.'

His companions fully understood and sympathised with the outburst, but since they all had their grievances against Frioulat they made no response. After a pause Antoine remarked:

'All the same, if he didn't see anything I don't see how you can blame him for saying so.'

Huchemin, Rogier and Naudin all supported this, and the chief was somewhat shaken.

'Well, if we're only going to say what's true we might as well give up playing altogether,' he said.

Antoine had to concede in his heart that he was right, and he was sorry that he had undermined his commander's authority. Above all, he was ashamed of having come forward as the defender of common sense against the splendid flights of imagination which seemed to constitute the very essence of heroism. He started to say something to make up for it but Frioulat instantly cut him short.

'You shut up! It's a pity you didn't go home with your mother instead of coming along and upsetting discipline. You've made us a quarter of an hour late already.'

'All right,' said Antoine. 'I don't want to make you late. So I won't belong to the gang any more.'

He turned and made off in the direction of the Rue Gabrielle, accompanied by Baranquin. The others hesitated. Naudin and Huchemin decided to follow the dissidents, but at a distance. Rogier was tempted to go with them, but not liking to break away openly from the chief he moved off more slowly, as though he were waiting for him. Frioulat was the last to leave the spot, and he did so crying:

'All right, you scabs, you can do what you like! I'm resigning. But you'll be sorry!'

The gang, now in four separate sections spread over a hundred yards, moved towards the expedition's destination, which was in a portion of the Rue Elysée-des-Beaux-Arts, enclosed between two sharp turns. The narrow street was dark and shut-in, as deserted as the summit of Montmartre.

As they drew near to the spot Antoine and Baranquin went more slowly, and the party closed up like an accordion. At the first turn the street was cut across by a deep trench marked with a red light. The work must have been carried out in the course of the past two days, because there had been no sign of it two evenings before, on the occasion of the first expedition. It was an element of surprise and terror of which much might have been made, and which caused them to regret that the game had been abandoned. The trench had to be crossed by means of a narrow plank with ropes on either side. Much though he wanted to bend down and examine the digging, Antoine did not stop, fearing that the others would suspect him of waiting for them.

The six of them came together a few yards farther on, outside the curio shop. It was a small establishment which the paintwork looked as though it had been deliberately scratched, and which bore no name. To compensate for this, the window contained numerous showcards, of which the largest read: 'Bargains for connoisseurs.' Another ran: 'Only the rich are allowed credit.' Each of the articles on show was accompanied by an historical description, highly suspect as

to its accuracy, inscribed on a slip of cardboard. 'Outdoor writing-desk of Queen Hortense' referred to a small, white-wood kitchen table scoured with *cau de Javel*. There was also a coffee-mill which had belonged to the Du Barry, a soap-box that had been Marat's, a bowler hat worn by Félix Faure, the pipe-stem of the Reine Pomaré, the fountain-pen with which the Treaty of Campo-Formio had been signed, and numerous other objects treated in the same spirit—culminating in a leather football-cover which was described a 'Cunning Device, once the property of Pope Joan'. The boys saw no fraud in all this, and never doubted that the dealer had collected in his shop the modest litter of history. The Campo-Formio fountain-pen was perhaps a little surprising, but their knowledge of the famous treaty was only slight. Certainly the idea never occurred to them that a shopkeeper might indulge in facetiousness in the pursuit of his trade. The inscriptions written in his own hand were necessarily true, as true as print, and to be accepted as a guarantee of authenticity. But it was not for the purpose of admiring historical relics that they had organised this long-range expedition. A single object in the middle of the window claimed their passionate interest. It was a pair of boots accompanied by a slip of cardboard bearing the simple words, 'Seven-League Boots'—words upon which the names of Campo-Formio, Marat, Félix Faure, Napoleon, Louise-Philippe and other great historical figures conferred an almost incontestable authenticity. Perhaps the six boys did not absolutely believe that they had only to put on the boots in order to cover seven leagues at a single stride. They could even suspect that the adventure of Hop-o'-my-Thumb was only a fairy-tale; but not being positively certain of this they did not find it hard to compromise with the suspicion. As a concession to probability, and perhaps also to avoid the risk of seeing faith destroyed by reality, they agreed that the magical powers of the boots must have been weakened in the course of time, and

might even have been destroyed altogether. But concerning their genuineness there could be no shadow of doubt. It was a matter of history, and the whole display bore witness to the fact. Moreover, they were strangely handsome, and of a surprising richness in contrast with the other objects in the window, nearly all of which were shoddy and ugly. Of fine, supple, black patent-leather, made to fit a child about their own age, they were lined with white fur that spread over the edge of the uppers to form a snowy border. The boots themselves had a proud, high-stepping elegance which was a little dismaying, but the border of fur invested them with the grace of a tender fantasy.

Antoine and Baranquin, the first to arrive, had taken up their position opposite the boots, noses pressed to the window, scarcely saying anything. Their delight was almost beyond expression, resembling a dream of enchantment in which from time to time one has a slightly painful reminder of life waiting outside. Donning the seven-league boots, Antoine embarked upon a confused and splendid adventure, and then, thinking of his mother and the garret whither she had returned alone, he caught his breath in a moment of remorse, taking a backwards glance at the life that awaited him on the side of the window on which he stood, so close to it in the wintry darkness that reality blew a little patch of mist on the pane through his mouth.

Beyond the boots, the children at moments caught a glimpse of the curio dealer, the purveyor of these marvels. The interior of the shop, like the display-window, was lighted by an unshaded bulb hanging on its flex, of which the dim yellow glare made it difficult to distinguish objects very clearly.

So far as could be judged from outside, the shopkeeper was a very little old man with a round, smooth face without wrinkles or pronounced features. He wore a high, starched collar, a tightly buttoned jacket and knee-breeches with

cycling stockings pulled up over his withered legs. Although he was alone in the shop the sound of his shrill voice was to be heard, always, with a note of irritation. Now and then he darted across the floor in a state of sudden, extreme agitation that caused him positively to leap, but for the most part he stayed seated beneath the electric bulb, facing a large stuffed bird, doubtless a heron, with which he seemed to be conducting a most vigorous dispute. Baranquin went so far as to affirm that he had seen the bird move and turn upon the old man with a threatening gesture. Anything was possible in that stronghold of the seven-league boots.

The gang was now again united, lined up at the window with all eyes fixed upon the boots. Frioulat alone remained a pace or two in the rear, gazing at the row with a scornful smile while he muttered to himself.

'They can go on staring at the boots all night if they like. It just makes me laugh. Because I had a plan. But you can't have a plan without a leader—you can't have anything.'

Antoine, whose revolt had led to all the other desertions, could not doubt that these remarks were addressed particularly to himself. Although it seemed prudent to ignore them and keep silent, he found this unsatisfactory. He wanted to do something splendid and heroic which would render him the one most worthy to wear the seven-league boots. Moreover, the rest of the row seemed to expect something of the sort from him. Rogier and Baranquin were gazing at him hopefully. His heart began to thump, but gradually he summoned up his courage. Finally he left the row, passed in front of Frioulat without looking at him, and went towards the door of the shop. The eyes followed him with admiration. The glass pane in the door, broken in two places, was covered by a bedroom rug fixed on the inside and bearing the label, 'Flying Carpet of the Thief of Bagdad'. In great trepidation Antoine turned the handle and timidly pushed the door half-open. What he then saw and heard kept him rooted to



the threshold. Standing in the middle of the shop, with his hands on his hips and his eyes gleaming, the shopkeeper was confronting the stuffed bird and talking to it in the voice of an angry little girl. Antoine heard him squeak:

'Well, at least say definitely what you mean. I'm sick and tired of your habit of always hinting at things. In any case, I refuse to accept your argument. Show me your documents, produce your evidence. Aha! You don't like that, do you? Well?'

The old man then fell into an attitude of lofty silence while he awaited a reply. Sinking his head with its round, apple-smooth face between his shoulders, and seeming to shrink into the high, stiff collar which enveloped him almost to the ears, he stood glancing at the bird and plucking at his mouth with an air of insulting sarcasm. Suddenly he executed a leap forward, and shouted, brandishing his fist under the bird's beak:

'I forbid you to say it! It's infamous! You're insulting the Queen. I will have nothing said against Isabel of Bavaria—nothing, do you hear me?'

Thereupon he proceeded to stalk round the bird with furious gestures, talking in a low voice. It was while he was doing this that, glancing up, he noticed the figure of Antoine in the doorway. After examining him with an air of mistrust he advanced upon him with long strides, head thrust forward and shoulders rounded, as though he hoped to spring upon him unawares. But Antoine, hastily slamming the door, gesticulated to his comrades and sounded the alarm in a voice of such urgency that it startled them all.

Seeming to reconstitute itself under his leadership, the gang followed him, bursting with questions, until they came to a stop a dozen yards from the shop. Frioulat, who had also made a movement of retreat, pulled himself together and remained still standing in front of the seven-league boots.

The shopkeeper had drawn aside a corner of the rug, and

with his nose to the glass was staring into the street, paying especial attention to Antoine's group. The boys glanced sidelong at him while they talked in undertones. Finally he let the rug fall and disappeared. Frioulat had had the boldness to remain standing in the light cast by the window while he gazed at them. Now he turned towards the group, which perhaps thought it was again becoming a gang, and said disdainfully:

'You needn't have run away, he wasn't going to eat you. But it's always like that when there isn't a chief. Somebody thinks he'll be clever and go first, but then at the last minute he gets in a funk. Well, all I do is just laugh.'

'No one's stopping you from going in,' said Huchemin. 'Why don't you, if you're so much cleverer than anyone else?'

'It's just what I'm going to do,' said Frioulat.

He went up to the door and, without hesitating, giving it a brisk shove, he flung it almost wide open. But as he was about to cross the threshold he drew back with a yell of fright. A bird, larger than himself, which had been hiding behind the door, had leapt at him uttering a strange squawking cry in which there was a hint of a human voice.

The gang was already scattering, and Frioulat bolted at top speed without even looking round. With the bird in his arms the old man came as far as the doorway, and after uttering a final screech, which completed the stampede, turned back into his shop.

Frioulat, running like mad, caught up with the others at the corner. None of them remembered the trench which they had crossed by means of a plank only a quarter of an hour before. It lay just beyond the corner. Rogier saw it as he reached the brink and tried to pull up, but could not withstand the thrust of the boy behind him; and Frioulat came charging along with such speed that he jostled those who were struggling to keep their balance and they all went

in together. The trench was about six feet deep, the earth frozen hard as stone.

Germaine had lit the stove, but to save fuel she was keeping the fire low while she awaited Antoine's return. Although the room was tiny, its exposed position made it difficult to keep warm. The attic window was warped and let in a stream of cold air. When the wind blew from the north one could hear it whistling between the roof and the sloping ceiling, made of laths covered with a thin layer of plaster. Seated on one of the two truckle-beds which, with a kitchen table, a wooden chair, the iron stove and a few soap-boxes, comprised her entire furniture, Germaine waited, body and mind unmoving, staring at the small flame of the oil-lamp, which she had turned low.

By half-past six she had begun to grow worried. Antoine was never late when he knew that she was waiting for him, and she had told him at midday that she would be home by five. Several times she went out on to the landing, hoping that the sound of his footsteps would reduce by a minute the period of her anxious vigil. Finally she left the door half-open. But when at length she heard her name called, it came to her through the window. The voice of the concierge rose from the bottom of the narrow courtyard, echoing as though in a well: 'Hey, Buge!' She was accustomed to summon her in this fashion when ladies came to call upon Germaine's services as a charwoman without wanting to be put to the trouble of climbing seven flights of stairs.

Downstairs a policeman was talking to the concierge in her *loge*. Directly she set eyes upon him Germaine guessed that he had come about Antoine, and her flesh shrank with terror. There was a moment of sympathetic silence as she entered.

'You're the mother of Antoine Buge?' said the policeman. 'Your son has had an accident. I don't think it's very bad.

He and some other children fell into a trench in the road, dug for drainage repairs. I don't know how deep it was, but the ground's very hard in this weather. They hurt themselves. They have been taken to the Bretonneau Hospital. You might be able to see him if you go there this evening.'

Out in the street Germaine took off her apron, rolled it and put it under her arm, after having removed the purse and handkerchief from one of its pockets. Her first instinct was to take a taxi, but then she reflected that the money could be better spent on Antoine. So she went on foot, conscious neither of the cold nor of her weariness. Her distress was accompanied by no impulse of revolt, and indeed, thinking of Antoine and their life together in the attic, reckoning up those years of happiness, it seemed to her that she had been guilty of evading her true destiny. The time had come to settle the account, and this disaster restored the balance.

'It had to happen,' she thought. 'I was too happy.'

At the hospital they showed her into a waiting-room where four women and three men were already seated, talking excitedly together. She gathered from the first words she overheard that they were parents of the other boys. In any case, she knew Mme Frioulat, a little, dark, hard-faced woman who kept a provision shop in the Rue Ramey where she was sometimes a customer. She was tempted for an instant to join the group in order to learn more about the accident, but no one paid any attention to her except Mme Frioulat, who had glanced rather forbiddingly at this new arrival, coatless and presumably husbandless, since she wore no wedding-ring.

Germaine sat down a short distance away and listened to the talk, which told her nothing. The others seemed to know no more than she did herself.

'I must say, I'd like to know how it happened,' said Naudin's father, a young man in the blue uniform of a métro ticket-collector.

'It was my husband who got the news,' said Mme Frioulat,

raising her voice to intimate to Germaine that she was not alone in the world. 'He wanted to get the car out, but I said, "Don't bother, I'll take a taxi." One of us had to stay and mind the shop.'

Each in turn described how they had received the news of the accident. Germaine was not long in learning their names, all of which were familiar to her from having heard them spoken many times by Antoine. She gazed with deference and admiration at the Naudins, the Huchemins and the Rogiers, all of whom bore the names of schoolboys. This seemed to bring her into some sort of relationship with them, although she remained fully conscious of the gulf separating her from people who went in pairs, followed a calling, had family connections and lived in apartments of their own. In the meantime they continued to ignore her, but far from resenting this she was grateful to them for their tact. Only Mme Frioulat alarmed her a little, as from time to time she felt that hostile gaze fall upon her puny person. She obscurely perceived the reasons for this hostility, and if anxiety had not almost robbed her of the power to think she would have had little difficulty in understanding them. Long experience had taught her that ladies of a higher status, such as Mme Frioulat, do not greatly care to find themselves in a situation where they are placed on the same footing as the poor and outcast. The grocer's wife from the Rue Ramey was suffering from a slight sense of social outrage. To be thus associated with a creature who was only too clearly an unmarried mother caused insidious doubts to arise in her mind. Although a shopkeeper's wife and the possessor of a car, could she continue to believe in the virtue of the social categories? Nevertheless she spoke to her.

'And you, Madame? Have you come here too because of this unfortunate accident?'

'Yes, Madame. I'm Buge's mother—Antoine Buge.'

'Ah, Antoine Buge. I see. I've heard of him. It seems he's

a little demon, that boy. I daresay you've heard about him too, Madame Naudin?

'Yes, I've heard Robert talk about him.'

'I thought as much. You've heard about him too. An absolute little demon.'

'No, truly, he isn't. Antoine's a very good boy,' protested Germaine, but Mme Frioulat would not let her go on.

'I daresay he isn't a bad boy at heart, but he's like so many others, he lacks discipline.'

'Children have to be kept in order,' said the ticket-collector.

Glad to be able to blame someone, and to find an explanation of the accident, the party of parents went on to exchange views on the upbringing of children, confining themselves to generalities but clearly directing their remarks at Germaine Buge. The anxiety from which all were suffering caused their hearts to overflow with indulgence for a son invested by misfortune with the garb of innocence, and none doubted that Antoine had led his companions into disaster.

'I'm not blaming you,' said Mme Frioulat to Germaine. 'I wouldn't have the heart to blame anyone at a time like this. Still, there's no getting away from the truth. There's no denying that if only you'd looked after your child better we shouldn't be here today. Now that the harm's done I've only got one thing to say, and that is that I hope it'll be a lesson to you.'

Called upon to endorse these sentiments, and gratified that she should have spoken in the name of them all, the other matrons greeted the speech with a murmur of approval. Germaine, who by reason of her calling had grown accustomed to lectures of this sort, accepted it without protest and, embarrassed by all the eyes regarding her, could only hang her head. A nurse came in.

'Cheer up,' she said. 'There's nothing serious. The doctor has just examined them. All he found was breaks and sprains and a few grazes. They'll all be perfectly all right in a few

weeks. But they're suffering a little from shock at present, and so it's better not to disturb them. You'll be able to see them tomorrow at one o'clock.'

The five boys were together in a small, square ward, in company with three other injured youngsters of about their own age who were in their third week in hospital.

Antoine had been put between Frioulat and Huchemin, opposite Rogier and Naudin, whose beds were side by side. Their first night was a restless one, and the next day was equally uncomfortable. Still in pain and feverish, they scarcely spoke and took little interest in what went on in the ward. Excepting Antoine, they received their parents' visit with no great pleasure or excitement. But Antoine had been thinking of nothing else since the previous evening. He had been afraid on his mother's account, thinking of her wretchedly alone in their chilly garret that night and for so many nights to come; and when she entered the ward he was distressed by the signs of fatigue and sleeplessness in her face. Knowing what was in his mind, the first words she spoke were to reassure him.

In the bed on Antoine's left Huchemin, talking between groans, answered his parents in a whimpering voice which discouraged questions. Frioulat, on his right, was decidedly terse with his mother, whose endearments seemed to him ridiculous. She called him 'darling boy' and 'precious angel'—a nice thing for the gang to hear! The nurse had asked that this first visit should not be too prolonged, and the parents stayed only a quarter of an hour. Their children in this unfamiliar setting, suddenly removed from their authority and endowed by the accident with rights of their own, had become strange to them and a little intimidating. Conversation was difficult. Germaine Buge, although she did not share this sense of unease as she sat at Antoine's bedside, nevertheless did not venture to stay behind, and left with the others.

Little Baranquin, the only one of the gang who had been undamaged by the tumble into the trench, arrived shortly after the parents had left, and his visit was more of a comfort to them. He was genuinely sorry to have been let off so lightly.

'You don't know how lucky you all are to have broken something. I wished I'd been here with you last night. I didn't half cop it when I got home. My dad was home already, and he gave me a hiding and then he went on about it all evening, about how I'd finish up in clink and all that. And he started again today at dinner, and I bet you I get some more this evening. Everything lasts a week with him.'

'Same here,' said Rogier. 'Coo, I should have copped a packet if I'd had the rotten luck to go home without anything the matter with me!'

Had it not been for their aches and pains, all would have congratulated themselves on being in hospital. Antoine, who did not remember ever having been scolded by his mother, was the only one to derive no consolation from this aspect of the matter. Even Frioulat, who was held to be spoilt by his parents, considered that he would have run fearful risks if he had gone home, like Baranquin, with his skin intact and his overcoat torn from top to bottom.

The ensuing days were livelier. The sprains and dislocations were a good deal less painful, and the limbs in plaster could be almost forgotten. Their enforced immobility limited their amusements to reading and chattering. They talked a great deal about the expedition, all passionately anxious to recall every detail. There were vigorous disputes which the voice of the nurses could not always subdue.

Pointing the moral of the episode, Frioulat extolled the principles of order and authority and maintained that nothing would have happened if the gang had remained faithful to its leader.

'All the same, that didn't stop you getting the wind up,' one of the others objected.

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'I was the last to bolt,' said Frioulat. 'And what else could I do when you'd left me there alone, blooming lot of funks.'

The fact that no one could move, and therefore no one risked a punch on the nose, made the discussion even more forthright.

But quarrels were forgotten when they talked about the seven-league boots. It was to be greatly feared that the shop-keeper would have found a purchaser by the time they left hospital, and for this reason Baranquin's visits were impatiently awaited. All were terrified lest he should bring bad news. Knowing this, he always hastened to reassure them the moment he entered. The boots were still in the window, and every day, he said, they grew shinier and more splendid, and the white fur lining more silky. In the late afternoon, when dusk was falling and before the lights were turned on, it was not hard to persuade oneself that the boots retained all their original virtue, and they ended by believing this almost without giving it a thought. Nothing was more enthralling and more restful than to lie in one's bed dreaming of those stupendous, seven-league strides. Each of them told tales aloud of what he would do if the boots were his. Frioulat's favourite notion was that he would beat all the world's running records. Rogier was as a rule more modest. He said that when he was sent out to buy a half-pound of butter or a quart of milk he'd go to a village in Normandy where he could get them cheaper, and pocket the change. But all were agreed that they would spend their Thursday afternoons visiting Africa and India, fighting the natives and hunting big game. The thought of such excursions allured Antoine no less than it did his companions. But other dreams, which he kept secret, were even dearer to him. His mother would never again have to worry about getting enough food. On days when money was short he'd pull on the boots, and in ten minutes he'd have been all round France. He'd pinch a joint of meat from a shop in Lyons, a loaf in Marseilles, vegetables

in Bordeaux, milk in Nantes and coffee in Cherbourg. He went so far as to consider finding a good coat for his mother, to keep her warm; and perhaps a new pair of shoes, because she only had one and they were badly worn. And then there was quarter-day, and if they hadn't got the hundred and sixty francs rent he would have to do something about that too. Nothing could be easier. You go into a shop in Lille or Carcassonne, a rich sort of shop where the customers don't come in clutching their money and wondering how to make it go round; and when a lady's getting her change at the cash-desk you just whip it out of her hand, and before she can say a word you're back in Montmartre. It isn't at all a nice thing to go taking other people's property, or even to lie in bed thinking about it. But it isn't nice to be hungry either. And when you haven't enough money to pay the rent of your garret, and you have to admit it to the concierge and make promises to the landlord, you feel just as ashamed as if you'd stolen something.

Germaine Buge brought her son as many oranges and sweets and picture-papers as the other parents brought their children: nevertheless, Antoine had never been so conscious of his poverty as he was in hospital, and this was because of the visits. To judge by the talk that went on between the other boys and their parents, life was an affair of overflowing and almost unbelievable richness. These conversations evoked pictures of a complicated existence abounding in brothers, sisters, cats, dogs and canaries, and extending to the neighbours over the way, to the uttermost ends of the *quartier*, to the uttermost ends of Paris itself, to the suburbs, to the provinces and even abroad. There was mention of Uncle Emile, of Aunt Valentine, of cousins at Argenteuil, of letters arrived from Clermont-Ferrand or from Belgium. For example, Huchemin, who at school didn't amount to anything at all, had a cousin who was an air pilot and an uncle who worked in the arsenal at Toulon. Now and then a relation called who

lived at the Porte d'Italie or at Epinal; and one day a family of five came from Clichy to sit round Naudin's bed, and what's more there were more of them at home.

Germaine was the only one who came to sit at Antoine's bedside, and she had no tales to tell of anyone. There were no uncles or cousins or friends in their life. Oppressed by the sense of their impoverishment, and by the presence and volubility of the others, they never again recovered the ease and unconstraint of the first day. Germaine talked a little of her visits to different households, but only briefly, fearing lest she should be overheard by Frioulat or his mother, for she suspected that it might be distasteful to a son of shopkeepers to be lying in the next bed to the son of a domestic help. Antoine worried about her meals and begged her not to spend too much on sweets and comics, also fearing lest he should be overheard. They talked almost in a whisper, and most of the time remained silent, gazing at one another, or with their attention distracted by the loud-voiced conversations going on around them.

One afternoon when the visiting period was over, Frioulat, generally so talkative, stayed quiet for a long time, gazing abstractedly at nothing as though in a state of enchantment. When Antoine asked him what had happened he at first only replied:

'Something marvellous!'

He was visibly exultant, yet his rapture seemed to contain an element of remorse which held him back on the verge of confidences. At length he could keep silent no longer.

'I told my mother about them. She's going to buy them for me. I shall have them when I get home.'

A chill pierced Antoine to the heart. The boots in that instant ceased to be a treasure belonging to them all, upon which each could draw without robbing his neighbour.

'I'll lend them to you,' said Frioulat.

Antoine shook his head. He could not forgive Frioulat for

having told his mother of something which should have remained a secret among them.

Upon leaving the hospital, Mme Frioulat took a taxi to the Rue Elysée-des-Beaux-Arts, where she had no difficulty in finding the shop her son had described to her. The boots were still in the window. She stood for a few minutes gazing at the other objects and their labels. Her knowledge of history was slight in the extreme, and the Campo-Formio fountain-pen caused her no astonishment. She did not think highly of this kind of trade, but the window nevertheless impressed her favourably on the whole. One notice in particular inspired her with confidence, the one which read:

‘Only the rich are allowed credit.’

Although the warning seemed to her tactless, the shop-keeper’s principles were evidently sound. She pushed open the door and saw, by the light of the hanging bulb, a little, skinny old man seated facing a big, stuffed bird with which he seemed to be playing a game of chess. Without paying any heed to Mme Frioulat’s entrance he went on moving the pieces on the board, playing in turn for himself and his opponent. Every now and then he uttered a truculent and satisfied chuckle, no doubt after he had made a move on his own account. Recovering from her first astonishment, Mme Frioulat was about to draw attention to herself when the old man, half rising from his chair, his eyes gleaming and his finger pointed threateningly at the bird, burst into a torrent of piping abuse.

‘You cheated! Don’t lie to me! You cheated again. You deliberately shifted your knight to cover your queen when she was attacked by two of my pieces and was just about to be taken. Aha, you admit it, do you? Well, don’t worry, my dear sir. You know what we agreed. I hereby confiscate your knight.’

He removed a piece from the board and put it in his

pocket, after which, gazing at the bird, he uttered a chuckle that turned into a positive convulsion of laughter. He had fallen back on his chair, and leaning over the board with his hands crossed on his chest and his shoulders shaking, he laughed almost silently, only occasionally allowing a small, shrill sound to escape him, like the squeak of a mouse. Mme Frioulat, somewhat alarmed, was now wondering whether she would not do better to withdraw. The old man finally recovered his gravity, and wiping his eyes said to his strange companion

'I'm sorry, but you look so extremely funny with that expression on your face. Please don't go on glaring at me, or I shall start laughing again. You may not realise it, but you're really quite ludicrous. However, I'm prepared to overlook what happened. I'll give you back your knight.'

He got the knight out of his pocket, and after restoring it to its place resumed his study of the board.

Mme Frioulat was still half inclined to leave. But reflecting that her visit had cost her the price of a taxi she decided to stay, and coughed several times on a rising note. At the third cough the curio-dealer turned to look at her with an expression containing more than a hint of disapproval.

'You play chess, of course?' he said.

'No,' said Mme Frioulat, disconcerted by the question. 'I don't know how. But I used to play draughts. My grandfather was very good.'

'In short, you don't play chess.'

For some moments the old man gazed at her with an air of astonishment and perplexity, as though he found her a phenomenon hard to account for and was wondering how she got there. Appearing to conclude that the problem was insoluble and in any case lacking in interest, he shrugged his shoulders and turned back to the board saying courteously to the bird

'It's your move, my dear sir.'

Mme Frioulat was so taken aback by her reception, and by the indifference of this singular tradesman, that for the moment she was speechless.

'Aha!' said the old man, rubbing his hands. 'The game's getting interesting. I'm most curious to see how you will get out of your very difficult position.'

'Excuse me,' Mme Frioulat ventured. 'I'm a customer.'

This time the curio-dealer turned to gaze at her in stupefaction.

'A customer!'

He was pensive for a moment, and then murmured in a low voice to the bird:

'A customer!'

After which he sat dreamily considering the chessboard, until suddenly his face cleared:

'I hadn't noticed that you'd played your rook. That makes it more interesting than ever. A masterly reply, and one which I was far from anticipating. My compliments, my dear sir. The situation is now completely reversed. I am the one who is in danger.'

Seeing him again absorbed in the game, Mme Frioulat decided to take offence and said in a louder voice:

'I can't afford to stand here all the afternoon waiting till it suits you to serve me. I've other things to do.'

'Well, but what do you want, Madame?'

'I came to ask the price of the pair of boots in the window.'

'Three thousand francs,' said the curio-dealer without looking up from the board.

'Three thousand! You must be mad!'

'Exactly, Madame.'

'Three thousand for a pair of boots! But it isn't possible. You can't be serious.'

This time the old man rose in annoyance, and planting himself in front of her, demanded:

'Madame, are you prepared to pay three thousand francs for that pair of boots or are you not?'

'Certainly not!' cried Mme Frioulat vehemently. 'Most decidedly not!'

'Then we need not discuss the matter any further. Will you kindly allow me to go on with the game?'

Frioulat's companions, when they learned that he was to become the possessor of the seven-league boots, were so indignant that he felt it necessary to placate them.

He explained that he had not really intended to tell his mother about the boots, and that it had just slipped out. And anyway she hadn't promised anything. She just hadn't said no. Remembering the look of triumph which he had not been wise enough to conceal, the others were by no means reassured. For a whole day he was practically sent to Coventry. They spoke to him only in monosyllables. But in the end the need to hope was stronger than misgiving. Although they were still uneasy, they managed to persuade themselves that the danger was only slight. By degrees they talked less readily about the boots, and in the end the subject was dropped, at least as a matter of conversation.

But inspired by Frioulat's example, each began to have hopes of his own and to make plans. One afternoon, after his mother's departure, Huchemin displayed a glowing countenance, and all that evening remained locked in triumphant silence. The next day it was the turn of Rogier and Naudin to rejoice.

Frioulat was the first to leave the hospital, and when the others made him promise to come and see them he said:

'It isn't going to be much trouble to *me* to come this little bit of a way!'

During the journey home, on which he was accompanied by his father, he asked no questions, not wanting to deprive



his parents of the pleasure of giving him a surprise. No mention was made of the boots when they arrived, but this did not trouble him. His parents were busy in the shop all morning. No doubt they were saving it up till lunch-time. Meanwhile he went out into the small yard at the back and made himself a fighter-plane, for which purpose there were ample materials at his disposal—packing-cases, barrels, bottles and tins stacked in the yard. Having rigged up an instrument board of salmon and fruit tins in an empty packing-case, and made a machine-gun out of a bottle of brandy, he was flying at two-fifty miles an hour in a clear sky when suddenly he spotted a hostile plane. Without losing his head for a second he increased speed to four hundred. The enemy didn't see him and went on flying all unawares. Frioulat swooped down with his machine-gun in action, but as he leaned over the edge of the packing-case the bottle of brandy slipped from his hands and was smashed on the stones of the yard. In no way disconcerted, he muttered between clenched teeth:

'The swine! He's knocked out my machine-gun!'

Mme Frioulat, who was in the room at the back of the shop, heard the crash and looked out to see the fragments of the bottle lying in a pool of brandy.

'Well, if it isn't the limit!' she exclaimed. 'The instant you come home you start getting up to mischief. It's a great pity you didn't stay where you were. A bottle of best quality cognac that's just gone up ten per cent! I was thinking of going to buy those boots for you this afternoon, but now you'll have to do without them. You certainly shan't have them now. Anyway, it was perfectly silly, all that fuss about another pair of boots. You've already got a pair that's practically new.'

Rogier left hospital two days later. When, upon arriving home, he brought himself to mention the boots, the whole family gazed at him in surprise. His mother, recalling the



promise she had made him, murmured, 'Oh, yes—boots', and noting her slight embarrassment, his father said:

'I'm sure it would be very nice for you to have a new pair of boots, but we'll talk about that when your school-work has improved. You needn't think you can ask for anything you like just because you broke your leg. I'm not saying your mother didn't promise you a pair when you were in bed, but you're better now. You're perfectly well again. And now what you've got to think about is making up for lost time. At the end of the year, if you have done your work well, you will have the satisfaction of knowing that you've done it well, and then we can come back to this matter of boots and—er—think it over. But there's no hurry, is there? Work is the great thing.'

Naudin, who went home the following day, encountered a similar disappointment, although in his case it was less wrapped up. When he raised the subject his mother, who had repeated her promise only the day before, said vaguely, 'You'd better ask your father', and his father said 'Boots' in a tone of as much indifference as if his wife had sought to arouse his interest in the causes of the Thirty Years War.

Antoine and Huchemin, whose beds were next to one another, stayed a further week in hospital after the departure of Naudin. Their isolation, surrounded by newcomers, led to an intimacy which was often painful for Antoine.

During that week he had to suffer a great deal, more on account of his poverty. Finding little or no matter for confidences in his own life, he was obliged to listen to those of Huchemin without being able to respond to them except with comments. Nothing is more depressing than the rôle of the humble confidant. Everyone knows, for instance, that in the classic drama it is the confidants who furnish the real tragedy. It is heartrending to observe these noble souls, to whom nothing ever happens, as with a courteous resignation they listen to the sagas of club bores revelling in their own

vicissitudes of fortune. Huchemin, discovering the delight of having someone to bore, overflowed with friendliness and anecdotes about members of his family. What prompted him especially to talk about his uncles and aunts was the hope he placed in them. Having learned by the experience of Frioulat, Rogier and Naudin that the promises of fathers and mothers were not to be relied on, he chose to believe that there was a greater virtue in aunts and uncles. He talked, indeed, as though his own were positively fighting for the privilege of presenting him with a pair of seven-league boots. Antoine was overwhelmed with tales of Uncle Jules, Uncle Marcel, Uncle André and Uncle Lucien, and of Aunts Anna, Roberte and Léontine. At night, when the others were asleep, he found himself musing more often than he ordinarily did, and at great length, on the strangeness of his own lot, which was that of having not a single aunt, uncle or cousin in the world. Except in the case of orphans, which are, however, not very rare, he could not conceive of a smaller family than his own. It was saddening and discouraging. A day came when he grew sick of being poor and a mere confidant. When Huchemin began to talk about a certain Aunt Justine he cut him short, saying calmly:

'Your Aunt Justine's just like all the rest of your family, and I'm not very interested in her. If you want to know, I've got enough to do thinking about my uncle who's due home any day now from America.'

Huchemin opened his eyes wide and exclaimed:

'From America?'

'Yes. My Uncle Victor.'

Antoine was a little pink. He was not in the habit of lying. His life was so simple that he had never felt the need for it. Being now assailed with questions he had to sustain and expand his lie, and it was with no displeasure that he built up the character of Uncle Victor. The thing became more than a game; it became an act of revenge upon life, and then

life itself, suddenly abounding and overflowing. Uncle Victor became a towering figure, handsome, brave, generous and strong, who had passed all his examinations, who killed a person every week and played marvellously on the mouth-organ. Just the sort of man, in short, to undertake the most heroic exertions, and fly in the face of the most numerous of families, in order to procure for his nephew a pair of boots he wanted. And he wouldn't worry about the price either. Having languished so long in the rôle of confidant, Antoine now let himself go with an enthusiasm and assurance that pierced Huchemin to the heart, leaving him with only the faintest ray of hope.

On the following day Antoine awoke with a guilty conscience, wishing he had not let imagination run away with him. Uncle Victor became an embarrassment, overblown and somewhat alarming because of the importance he had come to assume. Antoine tried to forget and ignore him, but so powerful and original was his uncle's personality that he could not be thus set aside. So Antoine had to get used to him, and during the days that followed he grew so accustomed to this new companion that he could not have done without him. Conscience no longer pricked him, except in visiting hours, when his mother was there. He would have liked to introduce her to Uncle Victor so that she, too, might be enriched by this magnificent relationship, but he did not know how to go about it. He could not ask her to support him in a lie. He thought of the old childish formula, 'Let's pretend we have an uncle in America and his name's Uncle Victor.' But his mother's childhood had no doubt been harder than his own, and her mind was closed to all notions of play. For her part, Germaine Buge suspected that he was keeping a secret from her, and both suffered from their inability to disclose what was in their minds.

Antoine began to view the time for leaving hospital with feelings of acute apprehension. The other boys would say,

'Well, your uncle must be back from America by now, but the boots are still in the window.' It would be dangerous to reply that Uncle Victor's return had been delayed. A hero who is not on the spot when he is needed is simply a lie or an illusion. The other boys would say, 'Nuts' and 'Turn it up' and 'Did you get your uncle out of a book or at the pictures?'

Antoine and Huchemin left hospital the same day, on a morning of icy rain which made them sigh for the warmth of the wards. They did not leave together. Antoine had to wait for his mother, who had gone to clean the house of Lefort, the butcher. He almost hoped she would not come, so formidable did the personality of Uncle Victor now appear. Germaine arrived late because she had had to wait an hour at the butcher's shop in order not to offend M. Lefort, who insisted on driving her the five hundred yards in his car.

It was the first time Antoine had been out since the accident, and he walked uncertainly, his legs still weak. Despite the wind and the rain he would not let his mother spend money on a taxi, and so they went on foot. They walked slowly, but it was a steep climb up the hill of Montmartre, under a clay-coloured sky, and Antoine grew tired and discouraged. He had not the strength even to answer his mother when she spoke to him, and at the thought of the seven flights of stairs which had to be climbed he wept silently under the hood of his cape. But even more distressing than the stairs was the pause at the concierge's *loge*. She questioned him with the affable condescension which poor people often show to those even poorer than themselves, and she saw fit to talk very loudly, in the voice she was accustomed to use with weak-witted or especially insignificant persons. Antoine was obliged to show her his leg and the place where the break had occurred, and to give her full details of his treatment. Germaine would have liked to shorten the ordeal, but she feared to offend a person having so much influence.

Finally he had to thank the concierge, who gratified herself by giving him ten *sous*.

When he entered their garret he had a shock, for the wallpaper was changed. His mother was watching him anxiously, uncertain how the surprise would affect him. He smiled in an effort to conceal his dismay. As he now realised, he had liked the old wallpaper, scratched and torn and darkened though it was, its pattern almost effaced with usage and grime. His eyes had been accustomed to seek out landscapes of his own imagining on those sombre walls, and the figures of beasts and men which came to life as twilight fell. The new paper, of a pale green which seemed already faded, was scattered with little buds of a darker green. Thin and badly pasted on by some casual odd-job man, it had a shoddy look. Germaine had lit the fire and the wind was making the stove smoke, so that the window had to be opened, which involved the use of stratagems against the flood of air and rain that came pouring into the room. Seated on his bed, Antoine looked at life with that early-morning clarity that comes sometimes to children when they are recovering from an illness. After laying the table, his mother said to him as she served the soup:

'Do you like it?'

Smiling, she looked round at the gimcrack walls.

'It's very nice,' said Antoine. 'I like it very much.'

'I had a job making up my mind. There was another one I liked, pink and white, but it would have shown the dirt more. I'd have liked to bring along samples for you to see, but I didn't want to spoil the surprise. But you do like it, don't you?'

'Yes,' Antoine repeated, 'I like it.'

And he began to cry soundlessly, in a steady flow of tears that seemed as though it would never stop. 'Don't you feel well?' his mother asked. 'Are you unhappy? Are you missing your friends?' He shook his head. Remembering that she had seen him cry like this before because of their poverty,

Germaine hastened to assure him that they had never been better off. She had just paid the rent, and so for three months they had no need to worry on this score. And last week she had found a new job, an hour and a half's cleaning very early every morning, and the people were pleased with her work.

'But there's something else I haven't told you. it only happened yesterday. Mlle Larrisson's dog's dead. Poor Flic, he wasn't a bad dog, but seeing that he's dead there's no reason why we shouldn't be the ones to gain by it. From now on I'm to have all Mlle Larrisson's left-overs. She offered them very nicely.'

Antoine would have liked to show a suitable gratitude for these signs of fortune's favour, but he remained plunged in wretchedness. His state of distress so troubled his mother that she was reluctant to leave him alone even for a part of the afternoon. At half-past one, however, seeing that he was calmer, she decided to go and do her two hours' cleaning for Mlle Larrisson, who was inclined to be critical of the way she worked.

The cause of Antoine's grief continued to perplex her, and later it occurred to her to go to meet the children as they came out of school in order to question his friends. The one she knew best, from having met him at Antoine's bedside or outside the hospital, was little Baranquin. Her talk with him was successful beyond her hopes. Baranquin had no doubt at all as to the reason for Antoine's unhappiness. Within a few minutes she had learned the story of the seven-league boots and Uncle Victor from America.

After losing her way several times, Germaine at length found the curio-shop in the Rue Flysée-des-Beaux-Arts. The window was lighted, but she could not open the door. She was wrestling with the handle when the curio-dealer, drawing aside the rug which covered the glass pane, signed to her to go away. Germaine did not understand and pointed

to the boots in the window. Finally the old man half-opened the door and said:

'Can't you see the shop's shut?'

'Shut?' exclaimed Germaine in astonishment. 'But it's not six yet'

'It hasn't been open all day. Today is my birthday. You can see for yourself.'

He opened the door wider to disclose himself entirely, and Germaine saw that he was wearing a morning-coat and white tie. She sought to explain the reason for her visit and to tell him about Antoine, who was waiting for her at home, but he would pay no attention.

'Madame, I am profoundly distressed, but I must repeat that today is my birthday. I am entertaining a friend who has come to visit me.'

He glanced over his shoulder and added, lowering his voice

'He's uneasy. He'd like to know who I'm talking to. Come in and behave as though you had called to wish me a happy birthday. He'll be furious because he's horribly jealous and everything I do annoys him, but it will serve him right.'

Seizing the opportunity, Germaine followed the old man into the shop. There was no one there but the big bird about which Baranquin had told her, and which appeared to her the more remarkable inasmuch as it was adorned with a white tie knotted at the middle of its long neck, and a monocle hanging by a black ribbon from one of its wings.

The curio merchant winked at Germaine and said in the loudest voice he could muster

'How kind of you, Princess, to have remembered your old friend, and what a delightful surprise for me!'

He glanced sidelong at the bird to note the effect of these words, and smiled in malice. Germaine in her bewilderment scarcely knew what to say, but the old man's fluency was such that he carried on both sides of the conversation, thus

making things easy for her. After a few moments he turned to the bird and announced in a voice of triumph:

'The Princess tells me I am entirely right. The Maréchal d'Ancre was at the bottom of the whole business.'

Forgetting the Princess, and, indeed, turning his back on her, he plunged into a long historical dispute in which he did not appear to gain the upper hand, since in the end he fell silent, gazing resentfully at the heron. Germaine, who had found this rather tedious, took advantage of the silence to remind him that she had come to his shop to buy the boots in the window.

'It's a strange thing,' said the old man. 'A number of people have been after them recently.'

'What do they cost?'

'Three thousand francs.'

He had answered as though without thinking, and he seemed to take no notice of her consternation. Suddenly he started and, glaring at the bird, cried out indignantly:

'Of course, you don't agree either! You don't think the boots are worth three thousand. Go on, say it—don't mind me! Since you're wearing a monocle today, you can do as you please.'

After a brief silence he turned back to Germaine and said, smiling bitterly:

'You heard? It appears that the boots are worth no more than twenty-five francs. Very well, then, you shall have them for twenty-five francs. Apparently I no longer count for anything in this place. It seems that this gentleman is the master. Well, take them, Madame.'

He got the boots out of the window, wrapped them in newspaper and handed them to Germaine:

'Wretch,' he said to the bird, 'you've made me lose two thousand nine hundred and seventy-five francs!'

Germaine, who was engaged in opening her purse, was disturbed by this thought.



'I wouldn't want to take advantage . . .' she said.

'Don't worry,' said the old man, 'I shall deal with him. He's filled with envy and malice I shall despatch him with a sword-thrust!'

Germaine saw, as he took the twenty-five francs, that his hand was quivering with rage. Directly he had the coins he turned and flung them at the bird's head, breaking the monocle, of which only a fragment remained hanging at the end of the black ribbon. Then, without an instant's pause, he snatched an old sabre out of the window and unsheathed it. Germaine Bugé fled with the boots, without waiting to see what he did next. She wondered for a moment, when she got outside, whether she should call the police or at least summon a neighbour. It seemed to her that the bird was really in danger. But on second thoughts she decided that to do anything of the kind would serve no purpose and might get her into trouble.

At the sight of the boots Antoine turned pink with happiness and the dismal new wallpaper seemed to him to glow with the bright green of spring-time. That night when his mother was asleep he got up noiselessly, dressed and pulled on the seven-league boots. Feeling his way across the garret in the pitch darkness, he opened the window with infinite precautions and climbed out on to the window-ledge. His first stride took him to Rosny-sous-Bois, in the suburbs, and with his second he reached the *département* of Seine-et-Marne. In ten minutes he was at the other end of the earth, where he stopped in a great meadow to gather an armful of the first rays of sunshine, tying them with gossamer.

He found his way back easily to the garret and slipped in without a sound. On his mother's narrow bed he laid his glittering burden so that its glow lighted her sleeping face, and he thought that she looked less tired.

## *Dermuche*

HE HAD murdered a family of three in order to get possession of a gramophone record which he had coveted for several years. The fiery eloquence of counsel for the prosecution was unnecessary, and that of the defending counsel unavailing. He was unanimously condemned to have his head cut off, and not a voice was raised in sympathy, in the courtroom or elsewhere. Heavy-shouldered and bull-necked, he had a huge, flat face, all jaw and no forehead, with small, half-closed, dull-staring eyes. Even had there been a doubt as to his guilt, his brutish aspect would have caused any sensitive jury to condemn him. Throughout the trial he stayed motionless, seemingly indifferent and uncomprehending.

'Dermuche,' asked the presiding judge, 'are you sorry for what you did?'

'Well, yes and no, your Honour,' said Dermuche. 'I am, and then again, I'm not.'

'Try to make yourself more clear. Do you feel any remorse?'

'Pardon, your Honour?'

'Don't you know what the word "remorse" means? Have you no feeling of distress when you think of your victims?'

'I feel all right, your Honour, thanking you all the same.'

Only at one moment during the trial did Dermuche display any interest, and this was when the prosecution produced the gramophone record. Leaning over the edge of the dock he gazed at it steadfastly, and when the gramophone, set in motion by the clerk, ground out the refrain, a smile of great gentleness passed over his dull, heavy face.

In the condemned cell he waited calmly for the day of execution, seemingly untroubled by the prospect. He never spoke of it to the warders entering the cell. Indeed, he had no desire to talk to them, and merely replied politely to the questions put to him. His sole occupation was to hum the magical refrain that had driven him to murder, and he knew it badly. His was a very slow memory, and perhaps it was his exasperation at being unable to recapture it which had taken him, on a September evening, to the modest villa in Nogent-sur-Marne. Three persons of small independent means lived in the villa, two old maids and an uncle, decorated with the Legion of Honour, who felt the cold. Every Sunday, at the end of the midday meal, the elder of the two sisters wound up the gramophone. In fine weather they kept the dining-room window open, and for three years Dermuche had known enchanted summers. Crouched at the foot of the villa wall he listened to that Sunday melody which during the ensuing week he sought to fix wholly in his memory, without ever being completely successful in doing so. But with the onset of autumn the uncle who felt the cold caused the window to be shut, and thereafter the music sounded only for persons of independent means. For three years in succession Dermuche had lived through the long months of deprivation, without music and without rapture. Little by little the refrain escaped him, diminishing day by day, until by the end of winter nothing was left of it but the longing. The fourth year he could not endure the thought of that long period of waiting, and so he broke into the villa. The police found him there next morning, listening to the song of the gramophone record in company with the three dead bodies.

For a month he had it by heart, but by the time the trial came on he had forgotten it again. Now, in the condemned cell, he gathered together the fragments restored to him by the playing of the record during the trial, but which every

day became more uncertain. *Tum-tum-ti-tum*, hummed the condemned man from morning till night.

The prison chaplain visited Dermuche and found him filled with goodwill. He would have liked it better, however, if the poor wretch had shown himself more receptive, so that the words of consolation entered his heart. Dermuche listened with the docility of a tree, but neither his brief replies nor his expressionless face afforded any evidence that he was interested in his soul's salvation, or even that he possessed a soul. Nevertheless, one day in December, when he was talking of the Holy Virgin and the angels, the chaplain thought he caught a little gleam of light in those dull eyes—so fugitive, however, that he was not sure if he had really seen it. At the end of the interview Dermuche asked abruptly: 'And the little Jesus, is he still alive?' The chaplain did not hesitate. No doubt he should have replied that the infant Jesus had once lived, but that, since he had died on the cross at the age of thirty-three, it was not possible to speak of him in the present tense. But Dermuche was so thick-headed that it was difficult to get him to understand. The fable of the infant Jesus was more within his range and might open his heart to the light of the sacred truths. The chaplain told the story of how the Son of God had elected to be born in a stable, between the ox and the ass.

'You see, Dermuche, it was to show that he loved the poor and had come for their sake. He might equally well have chosen to be born in a prison, among the most unhappy of men.'

'Yes, sir, I see. In fact, Jesus might have been born in this cell I'm in, but he wouldn't have wanted to be born in a villa.'

The chaplain contented himself with a wag of the head. Dermuche's logic was unassailable, but it was related rather too narrowly to his own particular case, and seemed unlikely to lead him into the way of repentance. Having thus nodded

non-committally, the chaplain went on to tell him about the magi, the slaughter of innocents, the flight, and finally how the infant Jesus, when his beard was grown, had died crucified between two thieves to open the gates of heaven to mankind.

'Only think, Dermuche. The soul of the good thief must have been the first of all human souls to enter Paradise, and that was not due to accident, it was because God wished to show us what every sinner may expect of His mercy. For Him even the greatest crimes are no more than the accidents of life'

But for some time past Dermuche had not been following the chaplain's narrative, and the story of the good thief seemed to him as obscure as the miracle of the loaves and fishes

'And so then little Jesus went back to his manger?'

He could think only of the infant Jesus. The chaplain left the cell reflecting that this murderer possessed no more understanding than a child. He even questioned whether Dermuche could be held responsible for his crime, and he prayed God to have mercy on him.

'A child's soul in a labourer's body. He killed those three old people without malice, just as a child cuts open its doll, or pulls off its legs. A child that doesn't know its own strength. An unhappy child and nothing more. And the proof is that he believes in the infant Jesus.'

A few days later, paying Dermuche another visit, the chaplain asked the warder who opened the cell door

'What's that he's singing?'

The male voice of Dermuche, like a deep-toned bell, could be heard incessantly repeating, *tum-tum-ti-tum*

'He never stops that *tum-tum-tum* of his,' said the warder. 'If only it sounded like something it wouldn't be so bad, but it isn't even a tune.'

This apparent lightness of heart, on the part of a condemned man who had not yet come to terms with Heaven,

was disturbing to the chaplain. He found Dermuche livelier than usual. His brutish face had an expression of gentle alertness, and through the half-closed lids there shone a gleam of laughter. Moreover, he was almost talkative.

'What's the weather like outside today, sir?' •

'It's snowing, my son.'

'Well, that doesn't matter. The snow won't stop him. A fat lot he cares about the snow.'

Once again the chaplain talked of God's mercy and the light of repentance, but the condemned man constantly interrupted him with questions about the infant Jesus, so that his exhortations were without effect.

'Does little Jesus know everybody? Is little Jesus the boss in Paradise? Would you say, sir, that little Jesus likes music?'

The chaplain finally found himself unable to get a word in edgeways. As he turned towards the door Dermuche thrust into his hand a sheet of paper folded in four.

'It's my letter to little Jesus,' he said with a smile.

The chaplain took it and read it a few minutes later.

'Dear little Jesus,' the letter ran. 'This is asking you a favour. My name is Dermuche. It will soon be Christmas. I know you don't mind about me doing those three old geezers in Nogent. You wouldn't have wanted to be born in the house of people like that. I'm not asking for anything here on earth, seeing it won't be long before I have my chips. All I ask is, when I get to Heaven can I have my gramophone record? Thanking you in advance, and good luck to you—Dermuche.'

The priest was horrified by the letter, which revealed all too clearly how impervious the murderer was to the idea of repentance.

'It is true,' he reflected, 'that the man is an innocent possessing no more discernment than a newborn babe. The trust he places in the infant Jesus bears sufficient witness to his child-like simplicity. But when he appears at the Seat of Judgment

with three murders on his conscience, and no vestige of repentance, even God will be able to do nothing for him. Yet his small soul is as pure as the waters of a spring.'

That evening he went to the prison chapel, and after having prayed for Dermuch, placed his letter in the plaster cradle of the infant Jesus

At dawn on the 24th December, Christmas Eve, a party of well-dressed gentlemen accompanied the warders into the condemned cell. Their eyes still heavy with sleep, stomachs rumbling and mouths suppressing yawns, they paused at a short distance from the bed, seeking in the pallid early light to make out the shape of a body stretched beneath the coverings. The blankets moved feebly and a faint wail came from the bed. The Public Prosecutor felt a shiver pass down his spine. The Governor of the prison straightened his black tie and moved apart from the group. Shooting his cuffs he sought a posture appropriate to the occasion, and with his head inclined forward, shoulders rounded and hands clasped in front of his fly-buttons, he said in a theatrical voice

'You must be brave, Dermuche. Your appeal has failed.'

Another wail answered him, louder and more insistent than the first, but Dermuche did not move. He seemed to be buried even to his hair, and nothing of him emerged from the blankets.

'Come, Dermuche, you mustn't keep us waiting,' said the Governor. 'Do show a little co-operation, just for once.'

A warder moved forward to shake the condemned man. He bent over the bed, then straightened himself and turned to the Governor with an air of astonishment.

'Why, what's the matter?'

'I don't know, sir. The bedclothes are moving, and yet . . .'

A long wail of heartrending poignancy came from the blankets. With an abrupt movement the warder stripped them off the bed and then uttered a sharp exclamation. The others,

who had pressed forward, in their turn uttered a cry of stupefaction. In place of Dermuche, on the uncovered bed, lay an infant a few months old. It seemed pleased to find itself in the light, and gazed placidly smiling at the visitors.

'What does this mean?' shouted the Governor, turning to the chief warder. 'Have you let the prisoner escape?'

'It's impossible, sir. I made my last round three-quarters of an hour ago, and I'm positive I saw Dermuche in his bed.'

Purple with fury, the Governor abused his subordinates, threatening them with the direst sanctions. The chaplain, meanwhile, had sunk to his knees and was offering thanks to God, the Holy Virgin, St. Joseph, Providence and the infant Jesus. But no one paid any attention to him.

'God almighty,' cried the Governor, bending over the child, 'will you look at that? It's got the same tattoo-marks as Dermuche on its chest!'

The others leaned over in their turn. The child had two pictures tattooed on either side of its chest, a woman's head on one side and a dog's head on the other. Dermuche had had exactly the same, even to their relative size. The warders all confirmed it. There was a long silence.

'I am perhaps mistaken,' said M. Lebœuf, the Public Prosecutor, 'but the child seems to me to be as much like Dermuche as a child that age can be like a man of thirty-three. Look at the big head, the flat face, the low forehead, the small, slit-eyes and even the shape of the nose. Don't you agree?' And he turned to M. Bridon, counsel for the defence.

'There does certainly seem to be a resemblance,' said M. Bridon.

'Dermuche had a brown birthmark on the back of one thigh,' the chief warder said.

They examined the child's leg and found the same thing.

'Fetch me the condemned man's finger-prints,' said the Governor. 'We'll see how those compare.'

The chief warder went off at the double. While they



awaited his return the others sought to find some rational explanation for the metamorphosis of Dermuche, which none could any longer doubt. The Governor alone took no part in the conversation but paced nervously up and down the cell. When the infant, alarmed by the sound of voices, began to cry, he advanced to the bedside and said in a threatening voice:

'You wait, my lad. I'll give you something to cry about!'

M. Lebœuf, who had seated himself beside the child, looked up at him with an intrigued expression.

'Do you really think this is your murderer?' he asked.

'I hope so. In any case, we shall soon know.'

Confronted by this exquisite miracle, the chaplain continued to give thanks to God, his eyes damp with tenderness as he gazed at the virtually divine infant lying between Lebœuf and the Governor. He wondered a little anxiously what was to happen now, but concluded with confidence, 'It will be as the infant Jesus decides.'

When the comparison of finger-prints had confirmed the extraordinary metamorphosis the Governor gave a sigh of relief and rubbed his hands.

'Well, now let's get on with it,' he said. 'We've simply been wasting time. Come along, Dermuche. Come along.'

A murmur of protest arose in the cell, and M. Bridon cried indignantly:

'You surely can't intend to execute a babe in arms! It would be a hideous thing to do, utterly monstrous. Even if we admit the fact of Dermuche's guilt, and that he deserved the death sentence, we have surely no need to plead the innocence of a newly born infant.'

'I can't go into those details,' answered the Governor. 'Is this Dermuche, or isn't it? Did he murder three people in Nogent-sur-Marne? Was he condemned to death? The law applies to everyone and I don't want any trouble. The scaffold has been erected and the guillotine was set up more

than an hour ago. This talk about the innocence of the newly born is merely tiresome. At that rate anyone could escape justice simply by turning themselves into an infant. It would be a bit too easy!

The defending counsel, with a maternal gesture, had drawn the covers back over the dimpled body of his client. The infant, responding to the warmth, laughed and crowed with pleasure, and the Governor looked coldly at it, finding this manifestation of gaiety out of place.

'You note the cynicism,' he said. 'He means to brazen it out to the end.'

'My dear Governor,' said the chaplain, 'is it possible that you cannot see in this episode the hand of God?'

'Perhaps, but that makes no difference. It's certainly nothing to do with me. It isn't God who gave me my job or who is responsible for my advancement. I've had my instructions, and I intend to carry them out.' The Governor turned to the Public Prosecutor. 'Don't you agree that I'm entirely right?'

M. Lebœuf took time for thought before giving his opinion.

'Undoubtedly your position is logically sound. It would be profoundly unjust for a murderer to be privileged to begin his life again instead of paying the just penalty of his crime. On the other hand, the execution of an infant is a rather ticklish matter. I think you would be wise to consult your superior.'

'I know them,' said the Governor. 'They'll be annoyed with me for putting them in an embarrassing position. However, I'll ring them up.'

The high officials concerned had not yet arrived at the Ministry. The Governor had to ring up their homes. Being still only half awake they were not in the best of tempers. The metamorphosis of Dermuche seemed to them a treacherous stratagem aimed directly at themselves, and they were highly indignant. The fact remained, none the less, that the

condemned man was now a babe in arms. But the times were harsh, and they feared for their advancement if they should be suspected of lenience. Having agreed among themselves they resolved that—‘the fact that the murderer has somewhat shrunk beneath the burden of remorse, or from no matter what cause, can in no way be allowed to divert the course of Justice.’

Accordingly the condemned man’s toilet was proceeded with—that is to say, he was wrapped in one of the bed coverings and the soft down on the back of his neck was shaved off. The chaplain then took the precaution of baptising him. It was he who carried him in his arms to the machine erected in the prison courtyard.

As they returned from the place of execution he told counsel for the defence of Dermuche’s letter to the infant Jesus.

‘God could not allow a murderer entirely untouched by remorse to enter Paradise. But Dermuche had hope on his side, and his love of the infant Jesus. So God effaced his life as a sinner and restored him to the age of innocence.’

‘But if his life as a sinner was effaced, then Dermuche committed no crime and those people in Nogent were never murdered.’

Wanting to be quite sure on this point, the Counsel immediately went to Nogent-sur-Marne. Upon arriving there he asked to be directed to the house where the crime had been committed, but no one had heard of any crime. He had no difficulty, however, in finding the house where the two Mademoiselles Bridaine lived with their uncle who suffered from the cold. The three old people received him at first with mistrust, and after being reassured, complained to him that that very night someone had stolen a gramophone record lying on the dining-room table.

# *A Roll of Daughters*

*(The story of a girl who could not be confined in a fairy-tale.)*

NOËL TOURNEBISE had so many marriageable daughters and so little memory that he could not recall their names and had to keep a list in his pocket. At four o'clock on summer mornings, and five in winter, when all the family was assembled in the farm kitchen and the coffee was steaming in the bowls, Noël would adjust his glasses and grumble as he got out his list:

"There's a fine lot of noise going on for a day like any other day. I ask you, is it a reasonable way to behave, the whole lot of you to be laughing and singing at the top of your voices when it's the time it is already? But that's girls all over. I said it often enough to the wife, in the days when she was still getting about with her broom, "Why do you always have to give me daughters to burst my cardrums", I said, "making the house like a nest of screeching magpies? However many there may be, I'd change the lot for a single boy." Yes, that's what I used to say to the wife.'

And while he was talking in this fashion, Noël would be laughing under his breath or even aloud with his eyes twinkling behind his glasses, because he rejoiced to have so many daughters. When he was at work in the fields he had only to glance out over the plain to see a dozen at any time, some on their way to wash clothes, some going to confession or wherever it might be, and others binding sheaves or just dawdling in the shade of an apple tree ('If only I could remember all your names!' he thought). Sometimes he would pass a girl on the road who was really his neighbour's daughter

and he'd mistake her for one of his own. He said to himself that he had so many that he didn't know where to put them all, the great laughing wenches, getting up to the Lord knew what when he wasn't there behind them to threaten them with a good slap.

Meanwhile the girls crowding the kitchen, seeing their father put on his glasses, would swallow their coffee in haste and for the time being stop laughing and squabbling and comparing their waists and the roundness of their calves (it would be too much to say that they were all pretty, but in the matter of legs there was not one who had reason to complain). Noël would unfold his list and go to the window to see better.

'Marie-Jeanne, 1902!' he would call. 'Are you there, Marie-Jeanne? You'll go to the Champ-Rouge to hoe the potatoes. Alphonsine, 1900, to the Champ-Rouge as well, and Lucienne, '97 . . . Louise, 1908 and Roberte, 1909, you'll take the donkey and go to the mill to fetch those two sacks of bran. . . . Christine and Eugénie, 1915, you'll mind the cows. . . . The following will come with me to the Ricerne field—Barbe, '90, Guillaumette, '91 and Marie-Anne, '95. . . . Véronique, 1917, will look after the geese. I'm sorry for her, a big girl of sixteen, but that's the best job I can find for her at the moment. As for the rest of you, you'll just have to find things to do in the woods or the garden or the house. If I had to plan the day's work for every single one of you there'd be no end to it.'

Nevertheless he never failed to address each one by her name, and before leaving the farmhouse he would warn them against idling for even so little as a quarter of an hour, and still more against letting themselves be caught by any prowling snatcher of virginities, because otherwise his little finger would tell him of it. And at this the girls would nudge one another and wink, thinking to themselves that in this matter of virginities such a thing was no more to be found

in that house than snow in high summer. The thing was so well known that the Tournebise girls never married and were a wicked snare to the men for ten miles around, and a terror to all God-fearing wives. Barbe, '90, although she was going on for forty-four and a bottom like two sacks of flour, was worse than any of her sisters, and the curé said that never in all his years as a curé had he known a hussy so outrageous as that infernal Barbe; so much so that when he saw her coming towards him with her hips swaying and her bosom going before her he was thankful for the hindrance of his cassock and even then had to repeat two or three prayers, paying attention to what he said. Lead us not into temptation. And what enraged him more than anything was to know that by her lamentable example the creature had led all her sisters into sin, from Guillaumette, '91, to Véronique, 1917, who burned with longings when she was barely sixteen. On the eve of feast days when the whole lot of them queued up at the confessional he went hot and cold at the thought of the abominations he was about to hear from their lips. But more than all the others put together was he terrified of Barbe, whose sins were so resounding and disorderly in their nature that the confessional was almost burst asunder by the impact, bounced, shaken and turned upside down.

'Father, you may be sure that I am truly repentant. I'd taken off my chemise, you see, to look for a flea that started just here, where I'm pointing, and it went down and down——'

'All right,' growled the curé. 'Get on with it.'

'Yes, father. Well, and then Noré l'outensot came along, and where do you think he found it?'

Almost daily the curé went to Noël Tournebise to complain about the disgraceful conduct of one or other of his daughters, but most often about Barbe.

'Really, Noël, I don't know why you don't keep those girls in better order. I've just heard that last Saturday Barbe was at it again, setting half the parish in an uproar.'

'Barbe?' said her father. 'Let me just make a mark on my list to remind me. Don't worry, she shall have a sound hiding.'

And Noël would search his pockets, but at moments such as these he could never find his list.

'I know exactly what it is,' growled the curé 'You condone the offence.'

'Nothing of the kind, Monsieur le Curé. She shall be punished, I promise you. Let me see—it was Guillaumette you said?'

'No, it was not. Still, make it Guillaumette if you'd rather. There'll soon be precious little to choose between them, except that Barbe is the one who takes the lead.'

Noël's list was in alphabetical order and contained all the information a father needs. A glance along the line told him both Christian name and date of birth. It was an excellent list, admirably written, with capital letters that he could read without glasses. But it was old and he made use of it at least twice a day, so that, although it had been copied on to stout paper, it was coming apart at the creases. There were also accidents to be reckoned with.

One such accident had occurred during the first year of its use, one morning when Noël had got the list out of his pocket as usual. The bottom of the sheet had got caught between the blade and handle of his clasp-knife and had been torn off. The strip had torn right across, leaving a gap, and Noël had never noticed that a name was lacking. For a time, when he called the roll of his daughters, he had a slight sensation at the end of something still remaining on the tip of his tongue, but that was all.

The one whose name was no longer called became lost among her sisters and no longer counted. Work and pleasure were shared so evenly between them that no one needed her, and she shrank into the shadowy region of minor habits that the mind does not precisely formulate. She was no more than

a unit, an undefined cypher in a number that was itself uncertain. Her name had gone astray in her father's pocket, and no doubt in mid-morning, when he opened his knife to cut his loaf of bread, it had been borne off on the breeze blowing over the plain, between the woods and the stream. No one heard it mentioned again, and it was as though it had never been. There was simply a familiar shadow in the house which went unnoticed, concerning itself like all the others with the daily business of the household and the farm. One of the sisters might say casually, 'The soup-pot needs putting on the fire' or 'Someone should go and cut some leeks'; and almost at once the pot would be on the fire and the leeks would be cut. About the house cupboards were tidied, bodices mended, buttons sewn on, often without anyone noticing. But it sometimes happened that some task went unperformed although the wish had been expressed, so that Guillaumette or Véronique or Marie-Thérèse had to do it themselves. And then they would glance covertly about them, and sensing the lack of a friendly presence would turn pale with superstitious awe; and that evening they would make a cake or hastily knit a pair of stockings and put them on the top shelf of a cupboard that was never opened except on these occasions.

When the sisters quarrelled and were on the point of coming to blows (and there were many sources of discord between them, as many, or perhaps a few more, as there were men in the district) they sometimes heard a sound like a sob borne on the air of the house, and then they would lower their upraised arms and look ashamed, while a murmur of contrition rose from their lips. But at other times when they were laughing aloud with a flame darting in their eyes, while they told one another of their latest escapade, with Marie Coutensot's husband or one of the four Pont brothers, on these occasions it was not a sob that they heard, but only a sigh.

After supper on summer evenings Noël Tournebise would sit out of doors smoking caporal in a cherrywood pipe, and



there would be young men thronging the fields and as many murmurs under the stars as there were daughters on his list, or rather, twice as many.

'The crickets are singing prettily,' Noël would say to his pipe.

When really it was just the opposite, and the song of the crickets, like that of the toads, the bullfrogs and the nightingales, was stifled in their throats by the sound of so many couples embraced in the cool shade of the evening. Voices would be raised in question and answer, Guillaumette and Frédéric, Marie-Louise and Léonard, so that it melted the heart to hear them. Voices in the dew of the meadows, now one and now another, and sometimes all together. As many young men as there were Tournebise girls. Together they made one voice that said nothing very much but was not hard to understand. And when one might suppose that the song was over there would still be the voice of Barbe, sounding like a roll of thunder. The crickets, the toads, the bullfrogs and the nightingales considered that Noël's daughters were decidedly free in their behaviour, and they looked the other way. They looked at a shadow moving between two hedges, along the lane that led to the woods. It was a graceful shadow, and except that it was solitary one might well have mistaken it for one of the Tournebise girls, Marinette perhaps, or Véronique.

At the place where the lane emerged from between its hedges the shadow paused on the plain, and having shaken off her clothes became a white, naked figure gleaming in the summer night. She rubbed her body and her limbs with dew, pausing to caress the smooth curve of her belly and the roundness of her hip; and with both hands she offered a bright breast to the moon, uttering a complaint in a voice smaller than that of the crickets. She said it was shameful that, firm and white though it was, the breast no longer counted. How soft it was in her hands, and better still in a

boy's hands, if only it had counted as a breast. And all the rest which now counted for nothing, it was a great shame. She said that breasts were desolate unless they could be given to a man, and the rest too. A white, heavy mist rolled over the meadows covering her to mid-thigh, but it ~~was~~ was a cold embrace. The naked form put on its shadowy garments and turned back whence it had come, along the lane between the hedges.

One evening when Noël with Barbe was returning from work in the fields they saw the curé, who came to them raising his arms in the air and crying that he had witnesses to prove that it was Barbe who had done him the evil turn of debauching two of his choir-boys.

'I hope you're proud of yourselves, the two of you! There's a fine achievement indeed!'

Barbe said that it was quite untrue, and that in any case she no longer took the smallest interest in men. Noël wagged his head and said:

'You see? She says it isn't true.'

'You're as much to blame as she is. When I think of those two unhappy youngsters, as innocent as the angels in Heaven—'

'Innocent, indeed! A fine lot you know about it!'

'Silence, you scandalous trollop! Two children to whom nothing would have happened if they had not had the misfortune to encounter a shameless slut . . .'

Barbe made a movement, and a flush of anger rose on her cheeks. But the curé repeated his words, because he was setting a trap for her.

'Yes, a shameless slut, and forty-four years old, upon my soul! Two harmless little boys set upon by a middle-aged jezebel—'

'Harmless!' cried Barbe, who could bear no more. 'As though they weren't the ones who started it!'

'You see, she's admitted it!' said the curé in triumph.

With a sigh Noël got out his list and made a cross against the name of Barbe, which came second, after that of Alphonsine.

'I'll see what I can do,' he said.

The next morning Noël got on his donkey and rode off in search of a husband for his eldest daughter. He was away three days and then returned with a stranger, a man with eyes of a very gentle blue. Barbe came near to flinging herself upon him, but something in the way he looked at her caused her to draw back. The man took his place in the household without apparent embarrassment at finding himself surrounded by so many girls. He went out into the fields and did as much work as four sisters put together. In the morning Noël unfolded his list and called out his name with those of his daughters.

'Man, you will go with Barbe and put the drags over the Trois-Bouts field.'

He was always sent to work in company with Barbe, and everyone supposed that it would not be long before they got married. All that was to be feared was that Barbe would ruin everything with her impatience. The Tournebise girls watched a little enviously as the couple set out for the fields, and never missed a chance of spying on them. But they saw nothing to encourage the hope of an early marriage. The man worked without raising his eyes, seeming not even to be aware of the fact that he had a woman at his side. At the end of a month Barbe declared that she had given up the thought of marriage, and the sisters began to pursue the man, each on her own account. All had fallen in love with him, and it seemed at first that this grand passion would influence their conduct for the better. But, alas, Barbe, having by great striving remained virtuous for a month, now broke out to such effect that in less than a week she had plunged a dozen virtuous wives into despair, without counting fiancées and the mothers of families. The curé was on the verge of a

breakdown, exhausted with the effort of preaching resignation to so many victims. And, as always happened, Barbe's evil example was the undoing of her sisters, who again plunged into sin. They said that the presence of a man in the house warmed their blood, and this seemed not impossible, considering the number of their lovers.

The man maintained an extreme reserve, but in the house, at mealtimes, his manner was strange. While all the girls devoured him with their eyes he sat gazing into space with an attentive air, as though he could really see something which escaped the rest of them. He was seen to smile and turn his head, to make a gesture and pause with his spoon suspended, as though awaiting a gesture in reply. When one of the sisters spoke to him he answered absently, as though he were listening to other words. Sometimes he seemed to be speaking to himself, but in a murmur so soft that it was difficult to catch anything of what he said.

'Man,' Noël said to him one day, 'you are not very kind to my daughters.'

'Good girls, all of them,' said the man. 'I am fond of them all.'

'Don't you want to marry one of them, this year or next?'

'Yes, indeed I do.'

'Then tell me which one, so that I can make a mark on my list.'

The man laughed and said:

'There is no way of telling you her name—no way at all. . . .'

When the man had been two months with them he seemed to lose his fondness for work. In the morning he always found some pretext for being the last to leave for the fields, and in the evening he was always the first to return. They would find him seated in the kitchen, laughing in exultation. At length, when Noël called the roll one morning, they found that he was no longer there, and they never heard of

him again. From that day on, when Josephine or Guillaumette said that it was time to put the soup-pot on the fire, they could no longer expect the thing to happen of its own accord. As they went about their daily tasks the girls wondered what it was that the man had taken with him, that now was missing from the house.

About a year after these events another strip got torn from Noël's list, this time from the top, and Alphonsine, whose name was immediately above that of Barbe, was borne off the breeze. So there was another daughter who no longer counted, another naked form lamenting to the crickets in the summer evenings. Barbe was now going on for forty-five, and it was a thing to wonder at that she had put on a dozen pounds while bringing to destruction as many men. Her ardours grew with advancing age, and the curé would no longer admit her to the confessional, preferring to absolve her without listening. And Barbe's sisters, with less imposing means, followed no less evil courses. The whole region was falling into decay, as though ravaged by some natural disaster, for the men had scarcely strength to bring in the harvest, and beasts and humans alike grew thinner in a way that was pitiful to behold. Only Noël's crops and cattle flourished, and the curé accused him of having deliberately brought about this state of things.

'It is all on account of the abominable Barbe, and you know it perfectly well. After that business of the choir-boys you can no longer pretend——'

'I tried to marry her off,' said Noël, 'but it didn't work.'

'Well, you'll have to find her another husband, and let's hope he'll take her a long way from here.'

As a result of the curé's nagging Noël set out once again on his donkey to find a husband for his eldest daughter. This time he was away five days, and he returned with a young man so shy and pink that Barbe wanted to eat him. Things did not turn out in quite the same way with this one as with

his predecessor. On the day of his arrival, by the time they had come to the cheese at the end of their evening meal, the young man was reduced to such confusion by the gaze of so many shameless eyes that he made excuses and left the room. He went out into the yard and, hearing the distant song of the crickets in the meadows, felt that he would like to hear it more closely. Passing between the two hedges he saw a shadow going before him down the lane, and he followed it until it became a naked form out on the open plain. Never had he imagined such a wonder of nakedness. Hearing her complain of the loneliness of her breasts he ran to tell her that he would do his best for her, and he was never again seen on the farm.

Hot-eyed and with clenched hands, Barbe waited for him until after midnight, but seeing that he did not return, that he had fled like the other, she went to bed and sought in vain to sleep, devoured as she was by all the demons of concupiscence. It seemed to her that there would never be enough men on earth to appease her torment, and the truth is that she wanted a man who would be a little new to her. That is how she came to conceive a most lamentable design.

On the following morning the curé was strolling in his garden, reading his breviary, when, as he turned a corner, he came almost on top of Barbe, who was pulling up her stocking while she gazed at him with a light of perversity in her eyes. He was overtaken with giddiness and felt his mouth go dry. The scent of woman's flesh, mingling with that of the flowers, robbed him of the power to pray and he thought that he was doomed. What was most abominable, but also alluring, was that the air around Barbe quivered as it does above a blazing fire. In a vibrant and ravening voice Barbe whispered to him things which it would take him five years to unlearn. But when he was on the very verge of succumbing, chance willed it that his servant called to him from the house, asking him to come and taste the new supply of communion

wine that had just been delivered. He crossed the garden at a run, sprang on to his bicycle and pedalled to the field where Noel was working, almost without drawing breath.

'You must find her a husband instantly' he shouted 'Instantly!'

'Which one do you mean, Monsieur le Curé?'

'Barbe, of course!'

Noel got out his sheet of paper and saw that opposite the name of Barbe, which now stood at the head of the list, above that of Charlotte, he had already put two crosses

'I'll remember,' he promised 'As soon as we've finished the hay——'

'No, you must start today, this very minute I'm coming with you'

Noel protested, but the curé pressed him so strongly that he went and got his donkey. It took them no more than a day to find a man. He was a gendarme on leave who stood six foot two in his socks and ate enough for three. He thought Barbe a handy-looking wench, and made no bones about saving so. And Barbe, for her part, thought him a very fine fellow with his big black moustache and his cavalryman's bearing. By the evening of the day of his arrival she was so firmly resolved to marry him that twelve of her sisters had to mount guard over her to ensure that she did not at once offer that which the bridegroom is accustomed to look for after the ceremony. The gendarme plucked at his moustache and rolled his eyes, and it was clear that he was deeply stirred.

In the morning as they sat drinking their coffee, and after the gendarme had entered the kitchen, Noel unfolded his paper. The name at the head of the list was that of Charlotte, and he hesitated for an instant before reading it out, as though he had had something else on the tip of his tongue. But he uttered it notwithstanding, and went on to call the names of Claudine, Clémentine, Dorothée, until he reached

that of Véronique, who came last. And when he had completed the roll-call a sort of sigh was heard in the house. It sounded a good deal like the bellows in a smithy, but it was the sigh of a ghost, and the gendarme, who had had little experience of ghosts, did not hear it at all.

'Someone ought to put a saucepan on the fire,' said Guillaumette.

Scarcely had she spoken the words than there was the saucepan, on the stove, and no one paid any attention to the circumstance. Noël was in the meantime asking the gendarme if he had slept well and if he was as much in love as ever.

'But will you please remind me of the name of the one you have chosen?'

This the gendarme was unable to do, for very good reasons. He examined all the sisters with care, and after hesitating between Lucienne and Marie-Louise finally pointed at Guillaumette. At this a great bellow of indignation resounded through the kitchen.

'Pardon me!' cried a voice. 'I should like to remind you that I'm here!'

'Who's that talking so loud?' asked Noël looking about him.

He received no answer and said to the gendarme:

'I thought I recognised . . . But no, it was nothing. It doesn't count.'

'It doesn't count, indeed?' thundered the voice. 'I ask you, Gendarme, does none of this count?'

Beneath the claspings hands of the ecstatic gendarme the Tournebise family saw a shadow become substance. It was a richly curved and ample figure, and all about it the air quivered as over a blazing fire.

'How solid it is,' murmured the gendarme, 'and how warm to the touch!'

'Well, upon my soul!'

Noël was greatly astonished, being sure that he recognised



one of his daughters. He called the roll again, but without being able to put a name to that familiar face, and then he began to look suspiciously at his list. Finally, as he got his watch out of his pocket, he found a scrap of paper caught in the case.

'Barbe, '90!' he cried, shedding tears of joy.

The wedding of Barbe Tournebise was both splendid and dramatic. She chose to invite all the men who owed her a moment of forgetfulness, and the church was not big enough to hold as many as half of them. On the evening of their marriage the gendarme received news that he had been appointed to a post of honour in one of the African colonies, where his wife's beauty received the homage that was its due.

Noel had three copies of his list made on parchment, and he never again mislaid a name. After Barbe's departure the Tournebise girls became so well-conducted that the curé held them up as an example to the other ladies of his parish. And since virtue is the most beautiful of all adornments they had no trouble in finding husbands.

## The Walker-Through-Walls

THERE LIVED in Montmartre, on the third floor of No. 75bis, Rue d'Orchampt, an excellent man named Dutilleul who possessed the singular gift of being able to walk through walls without experiencing any discomfort. He wore *pince-nez* and a little black beard, and he was a third-grade clerk in the Ministry of Registration. In winter he went by bus to his office, and in summer he went on foot, under his bowler-hat.

Dutilleul had just entered his forty-third year when his especial aptitude was revealed to him. One evening, having been caught by a brief failure of the electricity in the vestibule of his small bachelor apartment, he fumbled for a moment in the darkness, and when the lights went on again found himself on the third-floor landing. Since his front door was locked on the inside the incident caused him to reflect, and despite the protests of his reason he resolved to go in as he had come out, by walking through the wall. This strange attainment, which seemed to correspond to none of his aspirations, preyed slightly on his mind, and on the following day, a Saturday, he took advantage of the weekend to call on a neighbouring doctor and put the case to him. The doctor, after convincing himself of the truth of his story, discovered upon examination that the cause of the trouble lay in the helicoidal hardening of the strangulatory wall of the thyroid vesicle. He prescribed a regime of intensive exertion, and, at the rate of two cachets a year, the absorption into the system of tetravalent reintegration powder, a mixture of rice flour and centaur's hormones.

After taking the first cachet Dutilleul put the rest away in

a drawer and thought no more about them. As for the intensive exertion, his work as a civil servant was ordered by custom which did not permit of any excess; neither did his leisure hours, which were devoted to the daily paper and his stamp collection, call for any unreasonable expenditure of energy. So that at the end of a year his knack of walking through walls remained unimpaired; but he never made use of it, except inadvertently, having little love of adventure and being non-receptive to the lures of the imagination. It did not even occur to him to enter his own apartment otherwise than by the door, after duly turning the key in the lock. Perhaps he would have grown old in his sedate habits, without ever being tempted to put his gift to the test, had not an extraordinary event suddenly occurred to revolutionise his existence. M. Mouron, the head of his sub-section at the ministry, was transferred to other duties and replaced by a M. Lécuyer, who was brisk of speech and wore a small military moustache. From the first day this newcomer manifested the liveliest disapproval of the *pinet-nez* which Dutilleul wore attached to a short chain, and of his little black beard, and he elected to treat him as a tiresome and not over-clean elderly encumbrance. Worst of all, he saw fit to introduce into the work of his sub-section certain far-reaching reforms which were well calculated to trouble the peace of mind of his subordinate. Dutilleul was accustomed to begin his letters with the following formula: 'With reference to your esteemed communication of the such-and-such instant, and having regard to our previous exchange of letters on this subject, I have the honour to inform you . . .' For which M. Lécuyer proposed to substitute a more trans-Atlantic form of words: 'Yours of the such-and-such I beg to state . . .' Dutilleul could not accustom himself to this epistolary terseness. Despite himself he reverted with a machine-like obstinacy to the traditional form, thereby incurring the increasing animosity of his superior. The atmosphere of the

Ministry of Registration became almost oppressive to him. He went apprehensively to work in the morning, and at night, after going to bed, he would often lie brooding for as much as a quarter of an hour before falling asleep.

Outraged by a reactionary stubbornness which threatened to undermine the success of his reforms, M. Lécuyer relegated Dutilleul to a small and sombre room, scarcely more than a cupboard, next door to his own office. It was entered by a low, narrow door giving on to the corridor, and which bore in capital letters the legend: 'BACK FILES'. Dutilleul resignedly acquiesced in this unprecedented humiliation, but when he read some more than usually sanguinary story in his newspaper he found himself dreaming that M. Lécuyer was the victim.

One day his chief burst into his cupboard brandishing a letter and bellowing:

'This must be done again! I insist upon your rewriting this unspeakable document which is a disgrace to my subsection!'

Dutilleul was about to protest, but in a voice of thunder M. Lécuyer informed him that he was a routine-besotted mole, and crumpling the letter flung it in his face. Dutilleul was a modest man, but proud. Left alone in his cupboard he felt his temperature rising, and suddenly he was seized with an inspiration. Leaving his seat he passed into the wall between his chief's room and his own, but he did so with caution, so that only his head emerged on the other side. M. Lécuyer, seated again at his desk, his pen still quivering, was in the act of striking out a comma from the text of a letter submitted by a subordinate for his approval, when he heard the sound of a cough in his room. Looking up he perceived with unspeakable dismay the head of Dutilleul, seemingly affixed to the wall like a trophy of the chase. But this head was alive. Through the *pince-nez*, with their length of chain, the eyes glared balefully at him. What is more, the head spoke.

'Sir,' it said, 'you are a scoundrel, a blockhead and a mountebank.'

M. Lécuyer, his mouth gaping with horror, had difficulty in withdrawing his gaze from the apparition. At length he heaved himself out of his chair, plunged into the corridor and flung open the door of the cupboard. Dutilleul, pen in hand, was seated in his accustomed place, in an attitude of tranquil and devoted industry. M. Lécuyer stared at him for some time in silence, and then, after muttering a few words, returned to his office. Scarcely had he resumed his seat than the head again appeared on the wall.

'Sir, you are a scoundrel, a blockhead and a mountebank.'

In the course of that day alone the terrifying head manifested itself twenty-three times, and on the following days it appeared with a similar frequency. Having acquired a certain skill at the game, Dutilleul was no longer content merely to abuse his chief. He uttered obscure threats, for example proclaiming in a sepulchral voice punctuated with truly demoniac laughter:

'The werewolf is here, the end is near! (*laughter*). Flesh creeps and terror fills the air! (*laughter*).'

Hearing which, the unhappy sub-section chief grew yet more pale, yet more breathless, while the hairs stood rigid on his head and the sweat of anguish trickled down his spine. During the first day he lost a pound in weight. In the course of the ensuing week, besides almost visibly melting away, he developed a tendency to eat soup with a fork and to greet the guardians of the law with a military salute. At the beginning of the second week an ambulance called at his dwelling and bore him off to a mental home.

Being thus delivered from the tyranny of M. Lécuyer, Dutilleul could return to his cherished formula—'With reference to your esteemed communication of the such-and-such . . .' Yet he was not satisfied. There was now a yearning in him, a new, imperious impulse which was nothing less

than the need to walk through walls. It is true that he had ample opportunities of doing so, in his apartment for example, of which he did not neglect to avail himself. But the man possessing brilliant gifts cannot long be content to squander them on trifles. Moreover, the act of walking through a wall cannot be said to constitute an end in itself. It is a mere beginning, the start of an adventure calling for an outcome, a realisation—calling, in short, for a reward. Dutilleul was well aware of this. He felt an inner need to expand, a growing desire to fulfil and surpass himself, and a restless hankering which was in some sort the call of the other side of the wall. But an objective, alas, was lacking. He sought inspiration in his daily paper, particularly in the columns devoted to politics and sport, both of which seemed to him commendable activities; but perceiving finally that these offered no outlet for persons capable of walking through walls, he fell back on the crime columns, which proved to be rich in suggestion.

Dutilleul's first burglary took place in a large credit establishment on the right bank of the Seine. After passing through a dozen walls and partitions he thrust his hand into a number of strong-boxes, filled his pockets with banknotes and before leaving signed his crime in red chalk, using the pseudonym of 'The Werewolf', adorned with a handsome flourish which was reproduced in all the papers next day. By the end of a week 'The Werewolf' had achieved an extraordinary celebrity. The heart of the public went out unreservedly to this phenomenal burglar who so prettily mocked the police. He drew attention to himself each night by a fresh exploit carried out at the expense, now of a bank, now of a jeweller's shop or of some wealthy individual. In Paris, as in the provinces, there was no woman with romance in her heart who had not a fervent desire to belong body and soul to the terrible Werewolf. After the theft of the famous Burdigala diamond and the robbing of the Crédit Municipal, which occurred during the same week, the enthusiasm of the

crowd reached the point of delirium. The Minister of the Interior was compelled to resign, dragging with him in his fall the Minister of Registration. Nevertheless, Dutilleul, now one of the richest men in Paris, never failed to arrive punctually at the office, and was spoken of as a candidate for the *palmes académiques*. And every morning, at the Ministry of Registration, he had the pleasure of hearing his colleagues discuss his exploits of the previous night. 'This Werewolf,' they said, 'is a stupendous fellow, a superman, a genius.' Hearing such praise, Dutilleul turned pink with embarrassment and behind the *pince-nez* his eyes shone with friendship and gratitude. A day came when the atmosphere of sympathy so overwhelmed him that he felt he could keep the secret no longer. Surveing with a last twinge of shyness the group of his colleagues arrayed round a newspaper containing an account of the robbery of the Banque de France, he said in a diffident voice: 'As a matter of fact, I'm the Werewolf.' The confession was received with a huge and interminable burst of laughter, and the nickname of 'Werewolf' was at once mockingly bestowed on him. That evening, at the time of leaving the ministry, he was the object of endless pleasantries on the part of his fellow-workers, and life seemed to him less rosy.

A few days later the Werewolf allowed himself to be caught by a police patrol in a jeweller's shop on the Rue de la Paix. He had inscribed his signature on the safe and was singing a drinking-song while smashing windows with a massive gold tankard. It would have been a simple matter for him to escape by merely slipping through a wall, but everything leads one to suppose that he wished to be arrested, probably for the sole purpose of confounding the colleagues whose incredulity had so mortified him. These were indeed greatly astonished when the newspapers next day published Dutilleul's picture on the front page. They bitterly regretted having underrated their inspired *confrère*, and did him

homage by growing little beards. Some of them, carried away by remorse and admiration, went so far as to try to get their hands on the wallets or watches of their friends and relations.

It may well be considered that to allow oneself to be caught by the police in order to impress a few colleagues is to display an extreme frivolity unworthy of an eminent public figure; but the apparent exercise of free-will plays little part in a resolution of this kind. In sacrificing his liberty Dutilleul thought he was yielding to an arrogant desire for revenge, whereas in fact he was merely following the ineluctable course of his destiny. No man who walks through walls can consider his career even moderately fulfilled if he has not had at least one taste of prison. When Dutilleul entered the precincts of the Santé he had a feeling of being the spoilt child of fortune. The thickness of the walls was to him a positive delight. On the very day following his incarceration the warders discovered to their stupefaction that he had driven a nail into the wall of his cell and had hung from it a gold watch belonging to the prison Governor. He either could not or would not disclose how the article had come into his possession. The watch was restored to its owner and the next day was again found at the bedside of the Werewolf, together with the first volume of *The Three Musketeers*, borrowed from the Governor's library. The whole staff of the prison was on edge. The warders complained, moreover, of receiving kicks on the bottom coming from some inexplicable source. It seemed that the walls no longer had ears but had feet instead. The detention of the Werewolf had lasted a week when the Governor, entering his office one morning, found the following letter on his desk:

'SIR:

- With reference to our interview of the 17th instant, and having regard to your general instruction of May 15th



of last year, I have the honour to inform you that I have just concluded my perusal of *The Three Musketeers*, Vol. II, and that I propose to escape tonight between 11 25 p m and 11.35 p.m.

•  
I beg to remain, Sir,  
With expressions of the deepest respect,  
Your obedient servant,  
THE WEREWOLF'

Despite the extremely close watch kept upon him that night, Dutilleul escaped at 11 30. The news, when it became known to the public on the following day, occasioned an outburst of tremendous enthusiasm. Nevertheless, Dutilleul, having achieved another burglary which set the seal on his popularity, seemed to have little desire to hide himself and walked freely about Montmartre without taking any precautions. Three days after his escape he was arrested in the Café du Rêve on the Rue Clignancourt, where he was drinking a *vin blanc citron* with a few friends.

Being taken back to the Santé and secured behind triple locks in a gloomy dungeon, the Werewolf left it the same evening and passed the night in the guest-room of the Governor's apartment. At about nine the next morning he rang for his *petit déjeuner* and allowed himself to be captured in bed, without offering any resistance, by the warders summoned for the purpose. The outraged Governor caused a special guard to be posted at the door of his cell and put him on bread and water. Towards midday he went out and had lunch at a neighbouring restaurant, and, having finished his coffee, telephoned the Governor as follows:

'My dear Governor, I am covered with confusion. When I left the prison a short time ago I omitted to take your wallet, so that I am now penniless in a restaurant. Will you be so good as to send someone to pay my bill?'

The Governor hurried to the spot in person, and so far

forgot himself as to utter threats and abuse. Wounded in his deepest feelings, Dutilleul escaped the following night, never to return. This time he took the precaution of shaving his black tuft of beard and substituting hornrimmed spectacles for the *pince-nez* and chain. A sports cap and a suit of plus-fours in a loud check completed his transformation. He established himself in a small apartment in the Avenue Junot where, during the period preceding his first arrest, he had installed a part of his furniture and the possessions which he most valued. The notoriety attaching to his name was beginning to weary him, and since his stay in the Santé he had become rather blasé in the matter of walking through walls. The thickest, the proudest of them seemed to him no more than the flimsiest of screens, and he dreamed of thrusting his way into the very heart of some massive pyramid. While meditating on the project of a trip to Egypt he lived the most tranquil of lives, divided between his stamp collection, the cinema and prolonged strolls about Montmartre. So complete was his metamorphosis that, clean-shaven and hornrimmed-spectacled, he passed his best friends in the street without being recognised. Only the painter, Gen Paul, whom no detail escaped of any change in the physiognomy of an old resident of the quarter, succeeded in the end in penetrating his disguise. Finding himself face to face with Dutilleul at the corner of the Rue de l'Abreuvoir, he could not restrain himself from remarking in his crude slang:

*'Dis donc, je vois que tu t'es miché en gîgolpince pour tétarder ceux de la sûrepige'*—which roughly means, in common speech: 'I see you've got yourself up like a man of fashion to baffle the inspectors of the Sûreté.'

'Ah!' murmured Dutilleul. 'So you've recognised me!'

He was perturbed by this and resolved to hasten his departure for Egypt. But it was on the afternoon of this very day that he fell in love with a ravishing blonde whom he twice encountered in the Rue Lepic, at a quarter of an hour's

interval. He instantly forgot his stamp collection, Egypt and the Pyramids. The blonde, for her part, had gazed at him with considerable interest. Nothing stirs the imagination of the young women of the present day more than plus-fours and horn-rimmed spectacles: they have a flavour of film scripts, they set one dreaming of cocktails and Californian nights. Unfortunately the lady—so Dutilleul was informed by Gen Paul—was married to a violent and jealous man. This suspicious husband, who himself led a dissolute life, regularly forsook his wife between the hours of ten at night and four in the morning, but before doing so he locked her in her bedroom and padlocked all the shutters. During the daytime he kept a close eye on her, even going so far on occasions as to follow her as she went along the streets of Montmartre.

‘Always snooping, you see. He’s one of those coarse-minded so-and-so’s that don’t stand for anyone poaching on their preserves.’

But Gen Paul’s warning served only to inflame Dutilleul’s ardour. Encountering the young woman in the Rue Tholozé on the following day, he boldly followed her into a *céramie*, and while she was awaiting her turn to be served he told her of his respectful passion and that he knew all—the villainous husband, the locked door and the padlocked shutters—but that he proposed nevertheless to visit her that same evening. The blonde flushed scarlet while the milk-jug trembled in her hand. Her eyes melting with tenderness she murmured weakly: ‘Alas, Monsieur, it is impossible.’

On the evening of that glorious day, towards ten o’clock, Dutilleul was at his post in the Rue Noivins, keeping watch on a solid outer wall behind which was situated a small house of which he could see nothing except the weather-cock and the chimney-stack. A door in this wall opened and a man emerged who, after locking it carefully behind him, went down the hill towards the Avenue Junot. Dutilleul waited

until he saw him vanish in the far distance at the turn of the road, after which he counted ten. Then he darted forward, skipped lightly with an athlete's stride into the wall, and running through all obstacles penetrated into the bedroom of the beautiful captive. She received him with transports of delight and they made love till an advanced hour.

The next day Dutilleul had the vexation to suffer from a severe headache. It was a matter of no importance, and he had no intention of failing to keep his rendezvous for so little. However, chancing to discover a few cachets scattered at the bottom of a drawer, he swallowed one in the morning and another in the afternoon. By the evening his headache was bearable, and his state of exaltation caused him to forget it. The young woman was awaiting him with all the impatience to which her recollections of the previous evening had given rise, and that night they made love until three in the morning. Upon his departure, as he passed through the inner and outer walls of the house, Dutilleul had a sense of unaccustomed friction at his hips and shoulders. However, he did not think this worthy of any particular attention. Only when he came to penetrate the surrounding wall did he become definitely aware of a feeling of resistance. He seemed to be moving in a substance that was still fluid, but which was thickening so that it seemed to gain in consistency with every movement that he made. Having succeeded in thrusting the whole of his body into the thickness of the wall, he found that he could no longer progress, and in terror he recalled the two cachets he had taken during the day. These cachets, which he had mistaken for aspirin, had in reality contained the tetravalent reintegration powder prescribed by the doctor a year before. The medicine, aided by his intensive exertions, was suddenly having its intended effect.

Dutilleul was, as it were, petrified in the interior of the wall. He is there to this day, incorporated in the stone. Night-birds descending the Rue Norvins at the hour when the

clamour of Paris has died down, may sometimes hear a stifled voice seeming to come from beyond the tomb, which they take to be the moaning of the wind as it whistles at the crossroads of the Butte. It is Werewolf Dutilleul mourning for his glorious career and his too-brief love. Occasionally on a winter's night the painter, Gen Paul, taking down his guitar, ventures forth into the echoing solitude of the Rue Norvins to console the unhappy prisoner with a song; and the notes, flying from his benumbed fingers, pierce to the heart of the stone like drops of moonlight.

## *The Picture-Well*

MÉLITINE TRELIN went out to the road and said to the dealer in rabbit-skins:

'I haven't killed any this week, Monsieur Bosselet. Would you believe it, that buck of mine's no good for anything, not even to enjoy himself. So you see I can't kill for the present, with no more coming along.'

M. Bosselet nodded to show he understood and chuckled, thinking of the buck rabbit, and said:

'It's a thing that happens now and again with the male persuasion, Madame Trelin, that there's some that don't seem to know where their duty lies.'

Together they were overcome with merriment. The old woman was so shaken with laughter that her huge bosom bounced beneath her bodice. Still laughing she said:

'Well, you'll never change, I'll be bound.'

The skin merchant smiled modestly.

'You meet all sorts in our business, and that's a fact, but seeing it was you, Mme Trelin, I felt I had to stop for a bit of a laugh. And now I'll be getting along because I want to be in Glaisans before the cinema begins.'

'The cinema? What cinema?'

'A cinema with two hundred seats that's starting this evening. It's to be open Thursdays and Sundays in that barn that used to belong to the old lawyer. Well, good day to you.'

Mélitine stood watching him go and then went back into her kitchen. And all that afternoon she thought about the cinema. At the thought of such a novelty only four miles from her home she felt an unaccustomed lightness of heart, with now and then a twinge of anxiety as she wondered what

the old man would say to the idea she had. It was not that he was unkind, the old man, or much given to being vexatious, but stubborn as a mule and once he'd said no he'd stick to it, against all reason.

When old Trelin came in, the soup was on the table. He said as he sat down:

'See anyone this afternoon?'

'No, not a soul. Only Bosselet went by.'

'Bosselet that buys rabbit skins?' said the old man. 'He's a queer one.'

'The other day I sold him a skin for three francs fifteen. I had him properly that time.'

'You think you had him, do you? He's sharper than you, old woman.'

Mélitine gave a laugh that sounded false and then regretted it, because she could feel that the old man was on his guard. Bowed over the stew-pot and poking the fire with one hand, she thought quickly and said:

'You know what he told me?'

'Well, what was it?'

'He said there's a cinema now in Glaisans.'

The old man stayed silent, waiting, scratching the back of his hand against his last Sunday's beard. His attitude seemed to Mélitine encouraging, and with a diplomatic casualness, as though her husband's views did not enter into her calculations, she said:

'I thought I'd like to go on Sunday.'

At first there was no reply. It seemed to Mélitine that the daring departure was to be favoured with the indifference which she had hoped for. But then, without looking at her, the old man said:

'There's no sense in going to the cinema.'

'Why, it would only be to see.'

The old man turned slowly towards the stove, expelled a clear jet of saliva and said without raising his voice:

'You aren't going.'

Unavailing the soft words and the guile, so Mélitine prepared to try abuse. But she was checked by a sudden outcry coming from close at hand. Old Trelin sniggered softly in his nose.

'That'll be Clotaire putting his wife down the well again,' he said.

He went on eating his soup while Mélitine, deserting her stew-pot, ran outside. At the corner of Pignol's house she stopped, feasting with silent laughter upon the scene that met her eyes. Bent with arms outspread over the well coping, a sturdy little thick-set man with red hair was talking in an extraordinarily small, piercing voice to which a distant, muffled voice made answer, as though he were performing a feat of ventriloquism. He did so without apparent anger, and now and then a reedy chuckle caused his shoulders to shake. Mélitine heard him say deliberately:

'You're getting what you asked for, you cow. Do you want to tell me again that I'm drunk? I've put you where you deserve, you cow, and I don't know what stops me letting out the rest of the chain and having done with you for good and all. Do you hear me, you cow?'

Having had her fill of enjoyment, Mélitine interrupted the tormentor, saying with a great show of indignation:

'Aren't you ashamed of yourself, Pignol, to be treating poor Jouque like that? Why, the way she was bawling, poor Jouque, they must have heard her at the other end of the parish!'

Pignol turned to her amiably smiling.

'It's you, is it, Mélitine. What are you doing here? Your old man will be jealous.'

Mélitine had to laugh. She was truly sorry for Jouque and ready to admit that Clotaire was a drunkard and a good-for-nothing, but just the sight of his face with its big, crooked nose that seemed forever sniffing after a joke or a skirt, and



his little, artful eyes and his sickle-mouth, and right away she wanted to laugh. But he was a demon, was Clotaire, and no denying it, always thinking of new ways to torture Jouque, who was a poor, timid creature, submissive to all his whims. This was his newest fancy, to put her down the well. By means of a stout nail driven into the wooden cylinder he measured out the chain so that Jouque, standing in the bucket, was kept dangling just above the surface of the water, and there he would leave her, sometimes for as long as an hour, laughing at the poor soul's cries. There was no one in the village who did not know of his cruelty to her, but everyone kept silent because the simplicity of the fields is by nature indulgent to brutes.

Stroking the handle of an immense whip which he held in his hand, Pignol went on

'He'll be thinking we're meeting in secret, Mélitine. That's what he'll be thinking, your old man.'

'Well, let him think it,' answered Mélitine. 'There's not much can come of meetings with an old woman like me.'

And while Pignol was gallantly protesting a voice of misery rose from the depths of the well.

'Clotaire, pull me up, the meat will be burned!'

'Will nothing stop that cow mooing?' growled Pignol.

Leaning over the coping he called in his queer, choirboy's voice

'I'm not going to pull you up, do you hear? I'm off to have some fun with Birot's daughter, like I promised her I would. Good evening, ladies both!'

And with the laughter bubbling out of him, off he went.

Mélitine dared not haul Jouque up for fear of enraging Pignol. She peered down into the well, but her worn old eyes could see nothing but an occasional shimmer of water over which gleams of silvery light played.

Suddenly a sound of soft and almost unbroken sobbing

rose from the depths of the well, so desolate that Mélitine was torn with pity and her heart turned soft as a sponge, choking the words in her throat. The sobs filled the well with a lament of pitiful and monotonous desperation. Mélitine called timidly:

‘Jouque, my lovey—Jouque!’

The sobs died down.

‘Is that you, Mélitine?’

‘Yes, and you shouldn’t be weeping and wailing the way you are. If I had a man like yours I’d soon put him in his place, I promise you.’

Standing in the bucket, clinging with both hands to the chain, Jouque gazed upward at the circle of light against which mother Trelin’s head and shoulders were clearly defined. Now and then an awkward movement caused the bucket to sway in a manner that frightened her atrociously. She was a frail little woman, shrunken with the state of constant terror to which her husband’s fancies brought her. She had a thin face and big, blue, startled eyes, gentle in their gaze.

Mélitine continued tenderly to console her.

‘You mustn’t cry, now. It won’t go on like this for ever.’

‘It’s all very well to say that, but there’s nothing to be done.’

‘How do you know? He may change, the rascal. I remember what my own was like, he wasn’t always easy by a long way.’

‘Ah, but there’s no comparison, Mélitine.’

‘You don’t think so? And suppose I tell you that he won’t hear of me going to the cinema—you know, the new cinema at Glaisins.’

‘The cinema!’

‘Yes. I just took a fancy that I’d like to go.’

‘But what for?’

‘What for? Why, to see, of course. Have you ever been to the cinema?’

‘With a man like mine? That would be a marvel!’

'But you've heard people talk about it?'

'Perhaps I have, although I don't remember. Is it worth going to see?'

'Indeed it is. Margot, that's married to the Bedouin, she told me about one she saw. The hall's as dark as it might be your well, and you look at a big screen and the pictures are so lifelike you'd think they were alive. Margot told me the story, what it was about, but I don't rightly remember. There was a woman in it, a real beauty, and dresses such as you'd hardly believe, and gentlemen got up like it might be the Deputy or the Mayor; all fine folk and making love, Margot said it was pretty to watch. And then at the end they kissed. They kissed each other on the mouth.'

Jouque had forgotten where she was. She was listening, with her head bowed, to mother Trelin's story, while on the cold surface of the water her eyes pictured a happy couple for whom the world seemed to have been expressly made—a lovely girl and a handsome young man smiling at her in friendship.

'And I've not told you about the revolver shots,' Mélitine went on, 'because it seems they didn't make much difference. But it's hard, isn't it, me not having the chance to see a thing like that, and all because of an idea he got in his thick head, that stubborn old ox of mine.'

'Well, so you're not lucky either,' said Jouque. 'I can see that it's upsetting for you, not being able to go.'

The women meditated, one above the other. To relieve the silence, as it grew oppressive, Mélitine said:

'They're a fine lot, the men, I must say. When you're dealing with those beauties you've a right to take whatever you can get.'

She drew a knitting-needle out of her hair and began to knit in silence, still poised over Jouque. After a little while she glanced about her to make sure no one was coming and then said:

'Jouque, how would it be if we went all the same?'

'What!'

'Listen to me. Isn't it Sunday that Clotaire is taking a cow to Varpois, to be bulled?'

'Yes.'

'Well then, I'll tell my man that our Brunette won't stay quiet in the field because she's on heat, and I'll arrange it so we've finished the hay exactly on Saturday, so then he'll have to take her in on Sunday afternoon. When those two go off together, him and Clotaire, we needn't expect them back in a hurry. So while they're away we shall be able to go to the cinema.'

Jouque was dumbfounded by the vastness of the project, and at the thought of its possible consequences she was overtaken by a fit of trembling that caused the bucket to swing from side to side. Méline, bent over the coping, grew eloquent.

'Why shouldn't we? There'd be no danger. They won't be back before midnight, and drunk as owls, the pair of them. Are we to be frightened of those two scallywags? Let's go, I say; let's go!'

Jouque still hesitated. Over the gleaming surface of the water the handsome lovers passed and passed again, endowed with all the graces of the town.

'But if he found out?'

'How could he find out? They won't be back till after dark, and they'll make a last call at Piclet's café, that's for sure. Now then, is it settled?'

'Yes, it's settled,' murmured the wail.

Wearing a suit and leading his cow, Pignol called from the road:

'Are you ready?'

'Just a minute,' called Méline through the window. 'He's putting on his collar.'

In the kitchen the old man was growing irritable.

'All right, all right, I can manage. Go and untie Brunette.'

'Very well. But mind you're back by seven. If you're late I shall have something to say.'

She shouted the words so that Pignol should hear, and old Trclin was enraged at being thus spoken to in public. While Mélitine went to the cowshed he fished some money out of a secret hiding-place of his own, under the clock. Then he went out into the yard where Mélitine stood holding a little cow spotted with black.

'So you're ready at last,' said Clotaire. 'Then let's be off.'

'Yes,' said the old man, 'let's be off.'

But as they started Mélitine cried again:

'Remember, you're not to stop anywhere on the way.'

At this the old man was really angry. He turned and said, without raising his voice:

'I'm telling you to hold your jaw.'

The cinema was a great disappointment to Mélitine and Jouque. There was first a documentary film on beetroot cultivation in the United States which made them yawn their heads off. The big picture had an historical subject about which they understood nothing at all. While Mélitine fell quietly asleep Jouque continued to watch the screen hoping for something that would recall the vision she had seen on the water of the well, the night Clotaire went after the blonde. But in the warrior, cased in the uniform of the Hussars of the Guard, who cracked skulls and carried off the girls in between charges, she could discover no resemblance to the tender, pretty young man smiling at his betrothed, like in the glossy picture postcards at the tobacconist's. This caused her great distress. It was as though a hope had been betrayed, as though dearly loved friends had failed to arrive at a meeting-place.

As they walked home together after the performance Mélitine summed up her views:

'It's not even as good as going to watch a game of skittles at Piclet's, with the gramophone playing the "Valse Brune".'

Jouque nodded in agreement.

'And the time it took,' Mélitine went on. 'It's after ten. Let's hope our fine-feathered birds haven't got home before us. Why, what is it, my lovey? Are you crying?'

Jouque was soundlessly weeping, only the quiver of her shoulders betraying her unhappiness.

'Is it because you're afraid Clotaire may have got back?'

'Oh, no. I'm not worrying about that.'

'Well, what is it then?'

'I don't know,' said Jouque. 'I don't know.'

It was real fun to go on an outing with Pignol. He had friends everywhere and never fumbled when it was his turn to pay. Their heads somewhat fuddled with drink, the two men walked without hurrying beside their animals. As they came in sight of the first houses in the village old Trelin said:

'We'll look in for a moment at Piclet's, eh? It's not yet nine.'

'Just as you like, old fellow. We'll have a quick one and then go.'

'And then go? But what's the hurry? We've plenty of time.'

'Well, it was on your account I said that, not wanting to see you get into trouble with the Mélitine.'

'Ha—the Mélitine! She can go and make hay!'

There were plenty of customers in Piclet's, and Pignol's entrance was greeted with acclamation. Voices called to him from all sides. Everyone wanted him to join them. Laughter and jesting resounded in all the corners of the room.

That was what Pignol was like. When he went into a café the very wine seemed to sing. Tugging at the old man's sleeve he led him towards a table.

'Good evening to you, Mauglet. Good evening, Clavin. We're coming to sit with you. Juliette, let's have a litre of *blanc*.'

Gratified by his coming to their table, Mauglet and Clavin both wanted to call for bottles. But in a burst of generosity old Trelin cried:

'Take those back, Juliette, and bring us a round of *marcs*.'

It was a good *marc* with a little taste of apples that tingled pleasantly in the nose. Pignol said so, and the rest agreed.

'We'll play a hand of *manille* for the next round,' said Mauglet.

They played three hands, and after this had more white wine. The game grew lively. Pignol shouted in his piping voice:

'You see, Clavin, you see! I've caught you with the seven!'

Old Trelin was so under the influence that he could no longer remember trumps. Blinking over the cards as they went down he said in a voice of soft bemusement:

'The king of clubs, is it? I'll split him up the backside!'

'Not like that you won't!' bellowed Pignol. 'A trump's what you've got to play, a trump!'

'Right up the backside,' the old man doggedly repeated.

By eleven o'clock he and Pignol, thoroughly drunk, were the only ones left. They sat face to face gazing at one another with bleary eyes.

'Seeing you had trumps all the time you should have played them,' Pignol said again.

The old man, beyond speech, acquiesced with nods.

'Well, just the same, we've got to get our cows home,' said Pignol.

Led by their beasts they continued on their way.

Without worrying about Pignol, the old man took his cow into the byre and there let himself sink on to a heap of straw. As he fell asleep he heard Pignol's piercing voice through the open doorway:

'Why don't you show yourself, you bitch? I'll teach you to go off to bed without leaving a light.'

Pignol was in the bedroom, half undressed, before he noticed that Jouque was not in bed.

'Where the devil can she have got to, at this time of night?' he muttered.

He looked in all the three rooms of their dwelling, then in the barn and the cowshed.

'It's a queer thing!'

He called:

'Jouque! Hey, Jouque!'

But Jouque did not reply. Standing in the middle of the farmyard Pignol brooded over the mystery of her absence. A sudden fear clutched his heart.

'God almighty, but I didn't—I couldn't . . . Did I put her down the well before I left?'

His drunkenness partly dispelled by agitation, he ran to the well calling 'Jouque! Jouque!' The chain was run out and he wound it up. It came easily. Jouque wasn't in the bucket—not any more, he thought. He sat miserably trembling on the stone trough beside the well while he tried to sort out his recollections. But panic and the fumes of wine had so blurred his memory that he could not recall exactly what had happened at the time of his departure. His fogged mind came back constantly to the question, 'Did I put her down the well before I left?' The cry of an owl from a big walnut tree caused him a shock of indescribable terror. With chattering teeth he lay face down in the trough and heard the owl calling:

'Jouque? Where is Jouque?'

He got out of the trough and ran into the cottage.

As he opened the bedroom door a slight sound caused him to start convulsively, and he thought he was going to collapse. Mastering his fear he went in. Jouque was in the room, undressing. Pignol grasped her by the wrists and stammered:



'Where were you? Where were you?'

'Where was I?' said Jouque in a placid voice. 'I was at the cinema.'

Pignol's relief was too great for his anger to be immediate. He muttered from half-closed lips:

'You were, were you, you cow! We'll see about that in the morning. I'm too sleepy now.'

When he awoke Jouque was already up and seeing to the animals. Pignol pulled on his trousers, thrust his feet into sabots and went into the kitchen. He cast a sidelong glance at her as she made mash for the chickens, and without saying anything went and got the whip from its hooks on the wall. Jouque did not trouble to turn her head to see what he was doing. He piped furiously

'You know what you're going to get, don't you?'

She looked at him calmly and said

'You might as well wait till I've fed the fowls.'

Somewhat disconcerted by her unusual composure, Pignol agreed

'Go on, then. Meanwhile I'll have some food.'

While he sat eating he heard her calling to the fowls in a voice that sounded positively lighthearted.

'The bitch is having a game with me,' he thought.

A flush of rage overspread his cheeks, and picking up the whip, he went out.

'Come here, Jouque. The time has come. You had your fun yesterday—it's my turn this morning.'

She quietly put down her bowl and went towards the well. Pignol lashed her legs with the whip as she passed by him, and the thong left a bright, red weal on the bare skin, but she made no sound. At her husband's command she turned the handle, brought up the bucket and climbed on to the coping. The bucket was wide and deep, reaching to mid-thigh when she stood in it. Pignol made sure that the nail was in position,

controlling the length of chain. He aimed another blow at Jouque, who disdained to look at him, and said, 'Down you go.' And having concluded the operation he went back into the house declaring that a little fun had given him an appetite.

Jouque listened to his footsteps as they died away. Looking up towards the circle of light she saw that she was truly alone, and smiled with content. In order to balance more easily she sought to curl up in the bucket. She could almost manage it: by folding her legs beneath her she could sink down until only her bosom remained above the rim. Her eyes grew rapidly accustomed to the darkness, and with her head thrust over the side she gazed at the quiet surface of the water. The gentle lovers were still there, and they gazed back at her with friendly smiles. Never had they seemed so beautiful. Mirrored between their faces on the blue surface Jouque saw her own face, small but graceful, with bright eyes. So she took the comb out of her fair hair and unbuttoned her bodice. A slender girl appeared on the cold, clear water, offering to the lovers of the well her long hair and bare breasts. The lovers rested their heads on her white shoulders, happy in their love. Gently their faces drew closer together and Jouque saw that their lips were about to touch. She signed to them to wait for her and plunged in.

## *Legend of Poldevia*

IN THE town of Cstwertskst there lived an old lady named Marichella Borboia who had justly acquired a high reputation for piety and virginity. She heard Mass at least once a day, communicated twice a week, was generous in her gifts to the clergy, embroidered altar-cloths and distributed alms to the more deserving poor. Clad in black on all occasions, never addressing herself to a man except in circumstances of extreme necessity and always with lowered eyes, she provoked none of those vile thoughts which lead to the sin of lust, and for her own part had no knowledge of them. Finally, as though to enable her to fulfil herself in perfection, God had visited her with a great and grievous affliction which appeared, such is the miracle of a fervent heart, only to fortify her piety.

With the most tender, watchful care, Mlle Borboia had supervised the upbringing of an orphaned nephew named Bobislas. In her simplicity, and trusting to the reputation of those responsible for the conduct of the establishment, the old lady had confided this agreeable and promising child, whom she intended to follow the calling of notary, to the National High School, where his morals were speedily corrupted. His year of philosophical study, as happens all too often to those placed under the guidance of atheists, had proved especially disastrous. What he learned of the mechanism of the human passions served only to enslave him the more readily to his own, and taught him to profit by the passions of others. He took to smoking, drinking and staring at women with eyes gleaming with an evil concupiscence. Since he never looked at his aunt in this particular way, and

when in his cups was sufficiently light-hearted to make his state appear to be one of natural gaiety, the old lady never dreamed that her nephew was heading for perdition. When he left High School, Bobislas was articulated to a notary in Cstwertskst, and it was while he was serving his term that his infamy was made manifest. One afternoon when the notary was out, Bobislas rifled his cashbox and ravished his wife and his two maidservants, subsequently compelling them to accompany him to the cellar and there steep themselves with him in vodka and sundry wines. Fortunately the notary's daughters were away from home that day, but the damage was none the less appreciable. The robbed and outraged husband turned his clerk out of the house and complained to Mlle Borboia.

The old lady, her heart rent with horror at this revelation of depravity at so early an age, made of her anguish an offering to God and gallantly strove to lead her nephew back to the path of virtue. The effort was in vain. After essaying a dozen different callings and failing to persevere in any, the wretched youth went from bad to worse. The town of Cstwertskst resounded with the tales of his unbridled behaviour, his orgies, his brawls, the girls and married women upon whom he had brought shame and disaster, not to mention the loose women with whom he habitually consorted. For five years Mlle Borboia persisted in the hope that eventually he would mend his ways, showering on him, meanwhile, good advice and pious exhortations, together with all the money he required to enable them to bear fruit. But at last she realised that her generosity was serving only to maintain her nephew in sin, and that she must leave it to the teaching of necessity to reawaken in him a sense of duty. One evening when he came to her asking for money she had the courage to say no.

Such was the state of affairs when war broke out. For many years the Poldevians had been on bad terms with

their neighbours, the Molletonians. Fresh disputes were of almost daily occurrence between the two great nations, and their prospect of ever reaching agreement was the less inasmuch as both sides were invariably in the right. The state of tension was already acute when a serious incident brought matters to a head. A little Molletonian boy deliberately, and with a sarcastic smile, pissed across the frontier, sprinkling the soil of Poldevia. This affront to the national honour caused an instant upstirring of the Poldevian conscience, and mobilisation was promptly decreed.

Great was the activity in the town of Cstwertskst. The men were called up to defend the nation in peril, and the women all took to knitting. Mlle Borboia distinguished herself with a flow of garments as close-knit as they were abundant, and it was she who caused the largest candles to be burnt in church for the victory of Poldevian arms. Bobislas, then approaching his twenty-eighth year, had enlisted in the Hussar regiment stationed on garrison duty in the town. Peacocking in his gold-braided uniform, with his busby on his head and four feet of sabre swinging against his calf, he at once acquired an exaggerated notion both of his own importance and of his prerogatives as one of the nation's glorious defenders. His audacity and insolence thenceforth knew no bounds. While he awaited the summons to battle, the war for him was nothing but a series of brawls and debauches; and arguing that he was soon to shed his blood on behalf of the civil populace, he made ever more exorbitant demands upon them. There was not a woman or unmarried girl in the town whom he hesitated to assail with eyes and hands, harassing and pursuing them even into the church or their own homes, dipping shamelessly into the purses of terrified fathers and husbands and at a pinch holding people in the street to ransom on the pretext of persuading them to make voluntary contributions to the national defence. Mlle Borboia, who had hitherto retained

a remnant of affection for the abominable young man, now began to hate him with that ardour and intensity of which virtue alone is capable when confronted with the embodiment of the uttermost vice. This abhorrence, which she held to be among her most sacred duties, did not prevent the drunken monster from calling upon her. A string of vile oaths would herald his approach as he swaggered along the street. Swaying as he stood, his great sabre banging about and getting caught in the furniture, belching and bellowing, with no greeting other than a blasphemy, he would announce that she had better produce her money and look sharp about it. On several occasions when she was slow to obey he went so far as to half-unsheath his weapon, threatening to divide the saintly old body in two portions, in the vertical sense.

Finally, after six months of this barbarous and cut-throat existence, Bobislas was loaded into a railway truck with his horse and taken to the front. A huge sigh of relief went up from the town of Cstwertskst, the joy of the worthy citizens being so great that a particularly favourable war communique, issued on the day of his departure, went quite unnoticed. As for Mlle Borboia, she seemed to be born into a new life of sweetness and light. She recovered the accents of childhood when saying her prayers and heard the flutter of seraphic wings in her dreams.

Bobislas had been gone six months, and varying fortunes had attended the Poldevian arms, when the town of Cstwertskst was ravaged by an influenza epidemic. Among the first to be afflicted was Mlle Borboia, and with a perfect serenity she awaited the coming of death. Having made a will in favour of the most deserving local charities she died at five in the morning with the name of her creator on her lips, and when the news became known in the town it was generally agreed that she would sup that evening with the angels in Paradise.

When she reached the Gates of Heaven, Mlle Borboia found herself confronted by a strange spectacle which at first she did not understand. The roads leading to the radiant portals were filled with columns of soldiers marching noisily between two rows of civilians, lying or seated on the grass verges, who gazed at the military with eyes of sombre disillusion. Mlle Borboia was tripping along without musing at the side of one of the columns when she heard her name called. Looking round she recognised, among the civilians seated by the roadside, the notary whose wife Bobislas had dishonoured. This gentleman, who had predeceased her by a fortnight, came forward to greet her and with a smile of good-humoured irony asked her where she was going in such a hurry.

'I am going,' said she, 'to render my account.'

'Alas,' sighed the notary, 'the time for us to render our accounts is still a long way off.'

'That may be your opinion, but I should very much like to know why anyone should refuse me——'

'It is very simple, and if you look about you you will see why. Since war first began to rage along the frontiers of Poldevia there has been no room here for anyone but soldiers. They're marching into Heaven in column of fours, without having to undergo even the most trifling examination, and regardless of what sins they may have committed.'

'Can that possibly be true?' murmured the old lady. 'But it would be terrible!'

'On the contrary, nothing could be more proper. Those who die in a sacred cause deserve well of Heaven. That is precisely what has happened in the case of the Poldevian soldiers, who by fighting for the right have enlisted God on their side. But it applies equally to the Molletonian soldiers. Although they did not mention it to us down below, God is on their side as well. So there are a lot of new arrivals up here. And since on both sides the morale of the troop is

excellent, and the generals are displaying unparalleled genius, it is to be feared that the war will go on for a long time. We civilians cannot expect any attention until it is over, and even then we shall have to count ourselves lucky if our papers have not been lost in the confusion.'

Mlle Borboia was at first greatly downcast by the notary's disclosure, but upon reflection she doubted its truth. Although he had been a worthy man enough during his lifetime, he had never displayed any especial zeal in religious matters, and had moreover acquired a reputation for being as miserly as he was gluttonous, which in itself was more than enough to damn his soul.

The soldiers, mounted and on foot, were pouring through the splendid gateway, of which the widespread approaches took the form of a magnificent esplanade. Seated on a cloud overlooking the gates, St. Peter was supervising the entry of the troops and keeping count. Mlle Borboia, with the unconcern born of a clear conscience, walked boldly as far as the middle of the esplanade. Here an archangel came to meet her and said to her in a voice of infinite suavity that was like a foreshadowing of the music of Paradise:

'Old lady, you must turn back. Surely you know that civilians are not allowed on the esplanade.'

'Doubtless, most noble angel, you do not know who I am. I am Mlle Borboia of Cstwertskst. I am sixty-eight years of age and still a virgin, and I have lived all my life in the love and fear of the holy name of God. My parish priest, who was the director of my conscience . . .'

While thus setting forth her claims to the indulgence of the tribunal she continued to advance, despite the protests of the archangel, who sought in vain to prevent her.

'But now that I have explained to you that the esplanade—'

' . . . prayers first thing every morning, Mass in all weathers, after Mass a special invocation of St. Joseph and



thanksgiving to the Holy Virgin, beads at ten followed by a chapter of the Gospel, Benedicite at midday . . .’

Despite his instructions the archangel could not prevent himself from listening. To those celestial beings nothing is more delightful and absorbing than the enumeration of the merits and good works of a devout old maid. The passionate interest which we on earth may find in the romances of a Dumas can afford but the feeblest indication of the shiver of delicious ecstasy that overtakes them as they listen to the recital of those countless small daily strivings towards the good.

‘Listen,’ said the archangel, ‘your case appears to me an exceptional one. I will see what I can do for you.’

He led Mlle Borboia to the foot of the cloud on which St. Peter was enthroned, and springing aloft with a single motion of his wings whispered in the right ear of the glorious Keeper of the Keys, who listened attentively but without taking his eyes off the procession of soldiers.

The matter was practically decided, he was about to waive the regulations in Mlle Borboia’s favour, when another angel drew close to his left ear and informed him that the grand spring offensive had opened on the Poldevian front. St. Peter made a sweeping gesture, seeming to dispose of all the civilians in creation, and at once began to issue orders in a loud voice.

Driven back among the civilians at the side of the road along which she had come, Mlle Borboia, a prey to indescribable anguish, now found herself pushing past the advancing mass of troops, which was already growing denser. Infantrymen, sappers, light cavalry, dragoons and artillerymen were marching still with some degree of discipline, but with the different arms sometimes intermingled and to the accompaniment of a loud tumult of voices. While their N.C.O.’s barked orders the soldiers sang, shouted insults from man to man and formation to formation, jeered at the civilians, jested with the women and bellowed in unison those obscene

ditties which are a part of the heroic tradition. Occasionally a blockage delayed the progress of the endless column. The ranks closed up, and confusion and impatience gave rise to storms of invective, artillerymen abusing infantrymen, who in their turn rounded upon the dragoons or the grenadiers. Deafened by this hubbub, Mlle Borboia came near to believing that she was already in Hell. She walked despondently along the edge of the road, as often as not in the ditch, searching among the crowd of apathetic civilians for the notary from Cstwertskst or some other acquaintance whose company might be a solace to her in this hour of trial. Several times infamous ditties assailed her at point-blank range, bellowed from a hundred throats. At length, exhausted and in despair, she sat down at the edge of the ditch, her face bathed in tears.

A stoppage higher up the column caused a squadron of hussars to remain stationary at the point where she was seated. Leading the troop was an elderly, white-moustached captain who proudly carried his head under his arm, surmounted by its busby, while he soothed his agitated mount. Exasperated by the prolonged delay, he set his head on the point of his sword and raised it at arm's length in order to see what was going on. And suddenly a ringing cry of indignation attracted Mlle Borboia's notice.

'Thunder of Cstwertskst!' bawled the captain. 'It's those bloody rupply-wallahs who are holding us up! I might have known it! Those clods! They ride like blasted footsloggers! God dammit, are they letting suppl.-wallahs into Heaven? Why not gas-inspectors? Ten thousand thunders of Cstwertskst!'

All the hussars behind him rose in their stirrups and shouted:

'It's the muckin' fetch-and-carry boys holdin' up the works as usual, afraid of gettin' their ruddy feet wet! Clear the muckers out of the way! Clear 'em out!'

And with their voices thus in harmony they went on to sing a pæan to the glory of the regiment which began

‘When from another victory  
 Her bold Hussars ride home to Cstwertskst,  
 The streets as far as eye can see  
 Are lined with wildly waving skirts . . .’

Mlle Borboia could no longer doubt that she had before her the hussars of the Cstwertskst garrison. Indeed, she recognised the white-moustached captain from having often seen him trailing his sabre along the pavements of the town. He was positively known to have a mistress, a woman of loose morals for whom he bought furs and silk dresses, and she shivered at the thought that the Heavenly portals now stood open to such a man. Looking along the ranks she saw a number of familiar faces, among them that of a young ensign, pretty as a girl. He favoured the company of young men like himself, and things were said about him which she did not understand but which she guessed to be suspect, since ladies lowered their voices when referring to them. Nevertheless he too was headed straight for Paradise.

And then, as Mlle Borboia’s survey reached the rearmost files, a cry of stupefaction rose to her lips. In the horseman riding at the tail of the squadron she had recognised her infamous nephew, Bobislas. A movement of protest brought her to her feet at the edge of the ditch. To this heartless and conscienceless villain, this rogue, this cynical profligate addicted to the most squalid vices, the glory of Paradise was offered without discussion, whereas she might have to wait for years at the gates and perhaps be refused admission in the end. As she considered her modest, old-maid’s life, her prayers and her good works, the impulse of revolt that had filled her heart gave way to a sense of profound discouragement that seemed to leave no room for hope. In

the meantime Bobislas had recognised her, and he spurred his horse to the side of the road.

'Well, if it isn't the old faggot!' he exclaimed. 'Talk about a small world!'

The term 'old faggot' is a Poldevian expression designating old age in a disrespectful and denigratory sense, and on the lips of Bobislas it contained more than a hint of rancour.

'Queer that we should both have had our chips at the same time,' he went on. 'But as you see, I haven't done as badly as you expected. In fact, my future looks pretty all right, which is more than you can say, from what they tell me.'

The cruelty of this jibe was more than Mlle Borboia could bear, and she hid her face in her hands and wept. Bobislas was moved to pity and said kindly:

'Don't cry, old girl. I'm not such a bad lot as I look. I'll get you in. Hop up behind'

She did not understand, and so, as the column was about to move on, he reached down and lifted her up behind him, seating her astride his horse.

'Put your arms round my waist and hang on tight, and never mind about showing your legs, the sight of them won't blind anyone. Well now, and what's new in Cstwertskst?'

'The notary is dead. I saw him a little while ago at the side of the road'

'Poor devil. I had his wife, as you may remember.'

Mlle Borboia, in great discomfort, was wondering whether she should not ask Bobislas to put her down. It was a strange thing indeed for an old maiden lady, fortified with all the sacraments of the Church, to be riding on the crupper of a hussar's horse surrounded by a pack of drunken soldiery who laughed to see her in such a posture. But this was by no means the worst of it. When one has behind one a whole lifetime of striving for Christian perfection, it is mortifying in the extreme to owe one's salvation to a villain steeped in

the blackest sins. And it is no less shameful to be obliged to admit that one is entering Heaven by means of trickery and artifice.

'If you don't get copped you can't be stopped,' said Bobislas. 'Hang on tight.'

'The ways of Providence are inscrutable,' reflected Mlle Borboia with a touch of hypocrisy. The horses were moving at a walk, and there were frequent pauses to prolong her torment. At length the squadron emerged on to the esplanade opposite the golden gates. Celestial trumpets played the march of the Cstwertskst Hussars, and the leading files passed under the archway. Enthroned on his cloud, St Peter watched with a vigilant eye.

'Make yourself as small as you can,' whispered Bobislas.

The advice was unnecessary. In her black attire, and shrunken with shame and apprehension, Mlle Borboia was like a bundle of old clothes tied to the back of the horse. But just as they reached the gateway and were about to pass through, a powerful voice from the cloud brought them to a stop.

'Hey, you there, wait a minute!' called St Peter. 'What's that woman you've got riding behind you?'

Relaxing her grasp in her terror, Mlle Borboia came very near to falling off. Bobislas, however, rose in his stirrups, and turning to St Peter with a casual inclination of his busby, said in a male voice brimming with assurance:

'It's the regimental slattern, your Honour.'

'Oh, I see. Very well.'

Mlle Borboia swallowed this supreme humiliation with a sob; but an instant later she had quite forgotten it, for she had entered the Kingdom of Heaven, where whys and wherefores no longer mean anything at all.

## *Across Paris*

THE VICTIM, already cut up, lay in a corner of the cellar covered by strips of rough canvas spattered with brown stains. Jamblier, a little man with greying hair, a sharp profile and restless eyes, girt with a kitchen apron reaching to his ankles, shuffled his slippers over the concrete floor. At moments he stopped short while a slight colour showed on his cheeks and his anxious gaze turned to the latch on the door. To ease the strain of waiting he took a brush which lay soaking in an enamel basin, and for the third time scrubbed the damp surface of the concrete to rid it of any last trace of the blood which his butchery might have left behind. Hearing footsteps he got up and tried to wipe his hands on his apron, but he had begun to tremble so violently that the cloth slipped through them.

The door opened to admit Martin, one of the two men he was expecting. This new arrival, who carried a suitcase in either hand, was a short, sturdy man of about forty-five, wearing a worn brown overcoat so tight-fitting that it clung round his buttocks and threw into prominence his powerful shoulderblades. His bootlace tie was adorned with a large silver horseshoe, and he wore on his big, round head an astonishing black hat with a curved brim, shiny with use. The general effect was one of cleanliness and neatness, giving him rather the look of an inspector of police in a humorous cartoon. Even the thick black moustache, trimmed short at the corners of the mouth, was not lacking. Nodding amiably, he greeted Jamblier with an 'Evening, guv'nor', to which the latter made no reply. Behind Martin a stranger had appeared, a big, powerfully built man of about thirty, his hair fair and cropped short, his eyes small and pig-like, who

## *Across Paris*

was also carrying two suitcases. He had no overcoat, and his clothing had an air of extreme neglect. He wore a shapeless sports suit, badly stained, and a rust-coloured jersey with a rolled top which came up under his chin.

'Létambot, wasn't free this evening,' said Martin in reply to a questioning look from his employer. 'So I asked this pal of mine, Grandgil, to come instead. He's all right. You don't have to worry about him. And not afraid of work either.'

Jamblier gazed mistrustfully at the stranger, whose small, cunning eyes did not impress him favourably.

'He knows the job already,' Martin went on. 'We've worked together.'

'Well, so long as you know him I don't mind,' grunted Jamblier. 'Now don't let's waste any more time. You're late as it is.'

Followed by his visitors he went over to the corner of the cellar where the canvas covered a vague shape. Divested of its shroud, a pig appeared in the light of the electric bulbs. The carcass had been cut into a dozen pieces, which had then been carefully reassembled to display the animal as a whole, its under-belly gaping and its entrails removed. Jamblier stood aside to allow the others to assure themselves that it was all there.

'A beauty,' said Martin. 'What does he come out at?'

'Two hundred and fifteen pounds the way he is now. He's a bit bigger than the one the day before yesterday, but there's not more than twenty pound in it. Split up in four suitcases you won't notice the difference.'

'Think not? It's easy to tell you aren't the one that's going to carry them.'

'Go on. Two hefty blokes like you. Here, let's have one of the cases.'

Martin moved a step forward but was in no hurry to open the valise.

'Where's it for this time?'

'Montmartre—Rue Caulaincourt. The butcher will be waiting for you in the shop from midnight on. Let's get started.'

Martin was still in no hurry. Standing motionless a little in the background, Grandgil watched the two men with an air of calm indifference; but in his face, which resembled that of a shorn ram, the small piggy eyes were still smiling. Jamblier grew impatient.

'Better hurry it up, lads,' he said in a voice that grated despite his attempt to sound jovial. 'Time's getting on. You won't be there by midnight if you hang about here.'

'Half a minute, guv. First of all we've got to settle terms. What are you paying?'

Jamblier raised his eyebrows with an air of pained astonishment.

'Now look, Martin—when a thing's agreed it's agreed. We're all men of honour.'

'When it comes to honour,' said Martin weightily, 'I defy anyone to teach me anything about it. But on the other hand, I can't afford to work for nothing. When Létambot and me worked for you, as you know, we got three hundred francs each for delivering Rue du Temple or Charonne, and it was ruddy well earned. You can't call it dear—three hundred for sweating through the streets at midnight with fifty pound hung on the end of each arm, to say nothing of wearing out shoe-leather and the risk of coppers everywhere.'

Jamblier was doing his best to preserve an unruffled demeanour and to take this outburst with good humour, but the attentive and slightly ironical silence of the man with the ram's face was even more disturbing to him than Martin's words.

'All the same,' he said, 'it was three hundred very quickly earned, and you can't say it wasn't.'

'I'm not arguing about what happened last time. Let's say it was a fair price. Suppose it was. All right, I'm not



arguing about that. When a thing's agreed it's agreed. I've just got one thing to say.'

'Well?'

'Delivering Rue du Temple is one thing, and delivering right up on Montmartre is another. Isn't it?'

'All right,' said Jamblier. 'I'll pay you an extra fifty francs each. Now let's get on with it.'

He made another movement towards the suitcase. This time Martin put it down on the concrete behind him and said bluntly:

'I'm not asking for a tip. What I want is a fair price for the work and the risk. Six hundred to each of us for delivering your pig Rue Caulaincourt. Otherwise—good night!'

'I can see what you're after. You think you can put the screw on me.'

Martin thrust his black felt hat to the back of his head, disclosing a large, pink, bald patch. His voice shook with genuine indignation.

'You call that putting the screw on you! Two hundred pounds of pig to be carted from the Boulevard de l'Hôpital to the Rue Caulaincourt, right across Paris in the black-out, five miles if it's a foot, and pretty well to the top of Montmartre at the end, and having to keep on the move the whole time, with coppers and narks and Jerry soldiers everywhere—all for six hundred francs apiece!'

'I'll make it four hundred'

'If that's the best you can do you'd better look round for a couple of unemployed. We're men who know our rights'

'If I'd known,' said Jamblier with bitterness, 'I'd have hired the bicyclists who came round looking for work this morning. But I thought, well, you've got your living to earn. And this is the reward I get!'

'You needn't worry,' said Martin. 'If you want bicyclists I'll get them for you right away. I'll have them here in half an hour.'

Jamblier made no response to this offer. For two months past the bicycle-carriers had been the object of close police supervision. Their greater speed was offset by serious disadvantages. Indeed, they were more vulnerable than the foot-carriers, and more often caught. Thoroughly familiar as he was with the risks of his business, Jamblier knew that the cyclists could only trust to luck, whereas in the case of an experienced foot-carrier such as Martin, alert, quick to scent danger and to take advantage of the darkness, his luck depended a good deal on himself.

‘Four-fifty,’ he said.

Martin shook his head, confident of the justice of his demand and resolved not to concede a centime. Nor was Jamblier under any further illusion as to how the bargaining must end; if he continued to haggle it was merely with the instinctive obstinacy of his avarice. His growing fear that he might be left with the carcass on his hands for another twenty-four hours was fast turning to panic. But then, when the battle was as good as won, the man with the ram’s face, who had so far not uttered a sound, emerged suddenly from his silence. Regarding Jamblier with half-closed eyes in which there was a gleam of mockery, he said, with a sort of soft chuckle:

‘This is Number Forty-five, isn’t it, Monsieur Jamblier?’

The strange question caused Jamblier to start and turn pale. Absorbed in his altercation with Martin, he had rather forgotten this unexpected newcomer. He now turned to examine him again with an intentness heightened by alarm, seeking to discern the meaning of Grandgil’s expression as the small, wrinkled eyes stared back at him with an air of cool effrontery. The man’s clothes were, on the whole, reassuring, at least so far as their condition went. The worn, stained suit and the jersey with its rolled collar did not look like a policeman’s garments.

‘Why do you ask me that?’

'No particular reason, seeing I know it anyway. Monsieur Jamblier, Forty-five Rue Poliveau.'

His tone of voice was a threat in itself, 'calculated and cynical. Jamblier turned in an agony of apprehension to dart a reproachful and questioning look at Martin, as though calling upon him to account for the strange attitude of his friend. And Martin felt uneasily that he was at fault, since he held himself responsible for the behaviour of the man he had introduced to the proprietor of the cellar. Moreover, he had lied in saying that Grandgil and he had already worked together. The truth was that they had met that afternoon for the first time, in a small café on the Boulevard de la Bastille.

Under a lowering sky, with a strong northerly wind blowing down the canal towards the Seine, the day had seemed to be dying of cold. Leaning against the counter in the warm, dim light of the café, Martin gazed through the window at the icy dusk and the figures of passers-by tormented by the wind. On the far side of the canal the façades of the Boulevard Morland were darkening as the colourless clarity faded. The evening light, instead of softening the outlines of the objects upon which it fell, threw them into sharper relief. At Martin's side, also leaning against the counter, Grandgil was intently studying this clear-eyed dying of the day. Perhaps feeling the melancholy of the moment, the other customers were silent, except an old sailor, worn thin by age, who occupied the darkest corner of the café. Seated motionless with his hands flat on the table and his body very erect, lost in the folds of his jacket, he was talking to himself in a thin, almost inaudible voice whose quaverings had the softness of an evening prayer. One of his white, fragile wrists retained traces of tattooing half-effaced by age.

'Life's like that,' said Martin, nodding towards the vanishing scene beyond the windows. 'When you look at it, the sod, it makes you go cold right down to your guts.'

Grandgil, to whom the words were not precisely addressed, acquiesced with a nod, without, however, turning his gaze away from the window. He seemed to be searching that patch of twilight for something more definite than an image of life. The proprietor of the café switched on the lights and drew the black-out curtains. Slowly the two men turned back to face the bar, and their eyes met. Strangers though they were, it seemed to Martin that their long contemplation of the evening had established a bond of sympathy between them, although his neighbour did not otherwise show any interest in him. In his corner the old sailor, apparently disconcerted by the electric light, had ceased his monologue and with a wrinkled forehead was contemplating his hands as they moved restlessly over the table. Finally he looked towards the counter and called in an impatient voice, 'Girl!' At his third call the *patronne* opened the cash-desk and produced a scrap of paper on which were written three words which she spelled out with difficulty:

'Formosa . . . Taiwan . . . Fuchow . . . Have you got it? Formosa . . .'

The old man indicated with a gesture that he had heard, and again began to talk to himself.

The *patronne* explained to a customer:

'He's telling himself about his campaign in China, as he calls it. But he goes and forgets the names and then loses the thread. Well, what can you expect, with names like that? It makes you wonder where he got hold of them. Although I have to repeat them as much as ten times in an afternoon. it's all I can do to read them. And with my husband it's the same.

Grandgil seemed to be interested in the sailor, now returned to the pursuit of his memories.

'Old people aren't so much to be pitied as you might think,' remarked Martin. 'They can always go back and remember old times, and it's like with wine, the older they

are, the better they are. But when they're fresh they give you indigestion. Isn't that right?'

The other replied with a sort of grunt. Martin was almost annoyed at his indifference. He looked at the heavy profile, the worn, dirty suit, the jersey with its rolled top, and concluded that he had to do with a no-good, a chap without education, a casual labourer, probably, with scarcely a penny in his pocket. But then he thought that perhaps resentment was causing him to be unjust. Vaguely remorseful, and yielding also to a momentary impulse which made him want to talk, he went on:

'That old boy—all he's got left of the time when he was twenty is his blessed war in China. Well, I was in the 1914 war, but I'm not so old yet that I can see anything good in it, believe me!'

Since Grandgil took no more notice of this remark than he had of the one preceding it, Martin gave up the attempt at conversation and fell to thinking of that war of his own twentieth year. As always, one especial picture rose uppermost in his memory, that of a young soldier of the colonial infantry, armed with a long knife in his belt, climbing a sheer wall of high cliffs at the passage of the Dardanelles. While the guns of the fleet swept the plateau guarded by a line of Turkish riflemen along its rim, the soldier, Martin Eugène, saw nothing of the battle except the feet of the sergeant climbing immediately above him, and, very close, the tiny geysers of dried earth and splintered rock puffed up by Turkish bullets. Suddenly the pair of feet on which his eyes were fixed seemed to take flight. Standing upright on the rim of the escarpment, the sergeant made a violent gesture, and then, after a momentary pause in which he seemed to be struggling to regain his balance, fell backwards into the void. In his place there arose a tall, grey figure in which Martin Eugène, born in Paris, Rue des Envierges, in 1894, buried his knife up to the hilt.

Once or twice a year he found occasion to tell the story of that knife-thrust, to friends or to women, for reasons not unconnected with prestige. Wearing a rough and tough expression contradicted by his round, good-humoured face, he would go so far as to claim that, having learned the efficacy of cold steel, he was never without a big apache-knife, and he did not add that it had never served him as anything but a penknife. The truth was that when he recalled this adventure in the privacy of his own thoughts it was always with a slight feeling of sadness, even of regret that circumstances had not spared him the harsh necessity. This evening, however, his thoughts dwelt upon the details of that murderous minute with a certain pleasure. Mingled with the pictures of the climb, the sergeant and the Turkish soldier, was the image of a woman's face and the recollection of a quarrel, still hot and painful, which aroused in him something like a desire for violence. Unconsciously his eyes searched around him for a man's figure to reinforce his memory.

'Formosa        Taiwan . . . Fuchow . . . ' repeated the *patronne*

A woman clad in ample black skirts and a black shawl came into the café and took the sailor's arm.

'Come along, Father, it's time for supper. Half-past six. I've put the hot-water-bottle in your bed.'

After they were gone the regular customers exchanged a few remarks on the old man's life and his war in China. Two men discussed the question of whether it was true that the Chinese were accustomed to eat the eyes of their dead. Others, calculating from the old man's age, sought to arrive at the date of his China war. The name of Admiral Courbet, which often occurred in his monologues, cropped up in the conversation, and Martin, who until then had said nothing, declared in an aggressive voice, quoting his personal experience at the Dardanelles, that all admirals were bloody fools.

The violence of his manner occasioned surprise and gave food for thought. Some of those present seemed to catch an allusion to current political events, in which admirals were playing a part.

'Why do you say that? Who are you thinking of?' a voice asked.

'I'm thinking about admirals, that's all. There's no one here who's an admiral, is there?'

'I know what you're driving at!' said the voice, and from the far end of the counter a zealot with furious eyes came charging towards Martin to dispute with him, man to man. Martin had no idea what he meant, and he was destined never to discover. Another customer tried to hold the zealot back, but he wrenched himself free and in his haste to come face to face with the denigrator of admiralty did not trouble to avoid Grandgil. Having jostled him somewhat rudely, he was checked in his course by a powerful arm. At the same time Grandgil took the lower part of his face in his big hand and thrust him away, sharply but not brutally. The zealot staggered a few paces backwards and was swallowed up in a group of pacifiers, from the centre of which he yelped:

'I know what it is! Coppers always work in pairs! You can't fool me!'

Shouting at the top of his voice, Martin repudiated the charge of being a policeman, offered to show his papers, spread them out on the counter, and swore that he had been to prison for insulting the police. The customers averted their eyes and were silent. Only the yelpings of the zealot answered Martin. What was even more irritating was the attitude of the *patron* and his wife, who with smiles and gestures sought to allay Martin's agitation, and to display, both to him and to his companion, the respect and cordial goodwill that was proper in dealing with police-inspectors. Grandgil, on the other hand, appeared to be in no way put out by the suspicion with which he was now regarded; he

seemed rather to be amused as he gazed calmly about him, his little pig's eyes twinkling with mockery. His composure finally had a tranquillising effect upon Martin.

'It's only fit to laugh at,' Martin said. 'Let's be going, lad—back to police headquarters!'

He paid for the drinks, his own and that of the man whom he now regarded as a friend, although thus far he had not succeeded in getting a word out of him. Grandgil made no objection and they went out together.

The night was black, the wind keen. As they walked towards the Bastille it was Martin who made nearly all the conversation. A queer sort of day it had been, and one which had started queerly for him. That morning at breakfast Mariette had had an odd look about her. And at midday . . .

At rare intervals Grandgil replied to his confidences with a grunt. Martin ended by suspecting that he was not really listening, and so he sought to change the subject.

'Well, I'm not the only one with troubles of that sort. I daresay you've got them too?'

'No.'

'You're lucky. Well, perhaps you're not so interested in women?' •

'Maybe it's that.'

'The thing that matters most is to get enough to eat, particularly in these days. If you're in a bad way and going short of grub you naturally don't worry so much about women. It's having a full stomach that puts the thought of love-making into your head. Well, when it comes to earning a living I can't complain. I do all right. So perhaps I'm more tempted, you see, than some blokes. What might your job be, if you don't mind me asking.'

'I'm a painter,' said Grandgil after a slight hesitation.

'I shouldn't think that was much of a racket, the way things are. D'you manage to get along?'

'More or less.'



'Listen, if you like I can put something your way. I'd better say straight off that there's a risk, but it's well paid. . . . This evening, as it happens . . .'

Grandgil had set the two empty suitcases down on the table and with his hands in his pockets was enjoying Jamblier's agitation. The smile of the little, wrinkled eyes in his ram's face was one of insolent gaiety, and the very movement of his cropped, fair hair seemed to be provoked by a wave of mockery. Fully conscious, now, of his rashness in bringing him to that place, Martin flushed a deep red.

'You kindly hold your jaw,' he said to Grandgil. 'I'm the one that does the talking.'

The ram made no retort, but from his air of stolid indifference and his smile it appeared that the rebuke left him unmoved. Martin turned furiously to Jamblier, opening one of the cases.

'All right,' he said. 'Four-fifty.'

'Monsieur Jamblier, Forty-five Rue Poliveau,' said the ram calmly, 'my price is a thousand francs.'

Jamblier stared open-mouthed, and even Martin, shaken to the core, began to lose his wits. There was something in his assistant's behaviour that was beyond his understanding. His opening remarks had seemed to show a mere lack of tact, a crude attempt at intimidation by a novice in these matters who was trying to make his weight felt by the use of such means as he possessed. But this was open blackmail, scorning the precaution of polite phrasology and even any semblance of justification. Indeed, Martin seemed to perceive in it something more than this, something strange and almost inhuman. With a great effort he reassembled his wits and stiffened his resolve to meet Grandgil's attack.

'Listen, guv'nor,' he said firmly, 'don't you worry about what he says. You give me nine hundred and I'll settle with him.'

Jamblier, hesitating, consulted with him in a low voice. He was wondering whether, all things considered, it would not be better to pay off the blackmailer and postpone the expedition until the following evening. The loss of a thousand francs and the inconvenience of having to keep the carcass in his cellar now seemed to him trifles compared with the danger threatened by the ram.

'You do what I say,' Martin cut him short. 'I'll take care of everything.'

He spoke loudly and in a voice of furious anger. The ram had not even been sufficiently interested to look towards them to find out how the discussion was going. He was slowly making a tour of the cellar, examining the objects stacked along the walls as though he were making an inventory, and pausing occasionally to prod them. They were principally foodstuffs of many kinds and in fairly large quantities—dried vegetables, sugar, hams, sausages, spaghetti and maraconi, to say nothing of wines. Grandgil opened a wooden chest and let the lid fall back with a thud after he had extracted a handful of flour which he scattered casually over a crate of bottles. Further on, seeing a big paper sack, he punched a hole in it with his forefinger. Dried lentils came pouring out, and the sound of their pattering on the floor startled Jamblier. He ran towards them with a haste that was suddenly cut short.

'Jamblier, Forty-five Rue Poliveau,' pronounced Grandgil. 'It's two thousand francs now.'

Martin could not believe his ears. The ram seemed emphatically to belong to some species of humanity which he had not hitherto encountered. Jamblier, his cheeks flushing crimson, his jaws tight-set, stood motionless in the middle of the cellar. The lentils continued to patter on the concrete.

'All right,' said Jamblier. 'Let's get it over.'

Accepting the situation he took a thickly stuffed wallet out of his pocket and handed the ram two thousand-franc

notes. The ram took them and grabbed a third that Jamblier in his nervousness allowed to slip from his fingers. He stuffed it into his pocket with the others and then prepared to resume his exploration of the cellar. Realising that it would be fruitless to try and get the note back, Jamblier swallowed his fury and hastily restored his wallet to safety. Meanwhile Martin had gone over to Grandgil as he stood in front of a pile of packets of sugar. Clutching him by the arm he cried:

'You'll give back that money! You'll give it back at once!'

'That'll do,' said Jamblier 'I don't want any fuss'

'You look after your shop and leave this to me This is my business'

'I'm the boss here,' said Jamblier, raising his voice 'I don't want any scrapping in my cellar You've given me trouble enough already, and I've paid enough to be left in peace and quiet at least'

He was speaking suddenly with a note of authority which had hitherto been singularly lacking in his manner Martin was bitterly conscious of this, and letting go Grandgil's arm he turned upon the little man

'So now you're backing him up against me!'

'I'm not backing anyone up All I want is to be left in peace'

The ram had turned his back on the provisions and with amused eyes was watching the two men as they confronted one another Beneath that gaze Martin became keenly aware of the humiliation of being taken to task by the man he was seeking to protect, who himself had not raised a finger against the thief

'You needn't think I'm worrying about your ruddy three thousand—a hell of a lot I care! But I don't let anyone treat me like this!'

'You've let me in for it already,' said Jamblier, 'and that

ought to be enough for you. All I want is no more fuss. So shut up.'

'O.K. You're the boss. Well, let's pack the cases.'

The two men returned to the pig, and as they went, Jamblier murmured:

'I'm still wondering whether it wouldn't be better to put the whole thing off.'

'I tell you I'll be responsible.'

Martin wore a hard, determined expression. Jamblier made a small gesture, as though he were tossing for it, and acquiesced with a sigh. They began to pack the joints of pork in the suitcases. They weighed them carefully, passing them from one to the other and nodding their heads, anxious to get the load evenly distributed. When they were all in place they packed them tight with crumpled newspaper. The ram, ignoring these proceedings, had come to a stop in front of a meat-safe below which hung a ham and a long sausage. Getting out his knife he cut the string of the sausage and put it in an inside pocket of his jacket. Then he cut himself a thick slice of ham and went and sat down on the chest to eat it. Martin never for an instant lost sight of the ominous figure, whose every movement was an insult and a provocation.

When the suitcases were ready Grandgil came and took up his two without being asked to do so. This display of goodwill favourably impressed Jamblier, causing him to feel more hopeful of the success of the expedition. As they were leaving the cellar he thrust a packet of cigarettes into the ram's pocket, and seeing Martin scarlet-faced and snarling he said hastily:

'They're for both of you—to share on the trip.'

'Cigarettes in the dark!' sneered Martin. 'No better way of getting ourselves spotted!'

Jamblier led the way to the door with the key of the cellar in his hand. But instead of following him Grandgil put down one of his cases and declared:

'I want another two thousand.'

This time Jamblier had a sense of being vilely betrayed. He had always believed in virtue, while admitting none the less that it depended on circumstances. Like everyone else, he knew by experience that men have a sufficient regard for virtue to find a place for it even in their misdeeds, and to seek to justify their villainies with presentable motives. In all malpractice, above all in his own, he was able to perceive an element of good or an intention which was reassuring for the future of the human conscience. Jamblier had, in short, a practical, although optimistic, notion of good and evil. So that Grandgil's monstrous duplicity, which was like the contracting of an endless vice, his immeasurable treachery, appeared to him a phenomenon outside nature, something to be considered almost in metaphysical terms. It was only by degrees that he grew angry.

'Nothing at all,' he stammered. 'Not a cent!'

Martin, whose idea of honesty, despite his somewhat irregular way of life, was very much more rigid than that of Jamblier, and who readily believed in imperatives and absolutes, was scarcely less amazed at the ram's perfidy. However, it did not displease him that Jamblier should be taught a lesson, and so he refrained from saying anything.

'Not a cent,' Jamblier repeated. 'Not a cent.'

Whereupon the ram began to shout his head off in a powerful and resonant voice that set up brassy echoes beneath the vaulting of the cellar.

'I want two thousand francs, by God! Jamblier! Do you hear me, Jamblier? I want two thousand!'

'I don't want to butt in,' said Martin in the ensuing silence, 'but if you want someone to knock his teeth down his throat——'

'Jamblier!' bellowed Grandgil.

With one hand Jamblier signed to him to be quiet while with the other he got out his wallet. Having pocketed the

notes, Grandgil again picked up his case and moved towards the entrance. In the doorway he stopped once more and began:

‘I want another——’

But the words stuck in his throat. An irrepressible burst of laughter stifled him, causing him to bend with shaking shoulders over his suitcases.

The night was dark and rough, the sky scattered with high cloud driving before the wind. There must be eight or ten degrees of frost, Martin said, and presently the sky was certain to clear. The bitter blast of air whistling down the Rue Poliveau caused their fingers to stiffen on the handles of the cases. The two men, their collars turned up, walked with bowed heads to offer less target to the cold.

‘Let’s get into the road,’ said Martin. ‘It’s always better if you can. In the narrow streets it saves you tumbling down steps or over a heap of sand, and in the avenues you’re less likely to bump into anyone. But mind you keep to the left so you can see cars and bicycles coming, otherwise they cop you from behind.’

He had not forgotten his anger with the ram, but for the time being he was nursing it. The first thing was to get the load to Montmartre—two hours of heavy going, with wit alert, ears pricked and eyes like a cat’s. After that the account could be settled. In the meantime he intended to keep cool and to concentrate all his faculties on ensuring the success of an enterprise which Grandgil’s unpredictable conduct would probably not make easier. ‘Presently,’ he reflected, ‘we’ll have it out man to man, but by that time, my lad, you’ll have sweated five miles, and if I don’t keep you up to it until we get there my name isn’t Martin.’

As they turned into the Boulevard de l’Hôpital a fierce and icy wind, sweeping down without hindrance from the north, almost took their breath away. Martin had to put down his suitcases while he fixed the black hat more tightly on his

head. Grandgil relieved his bad temper by swearing, but the wind was so strong that he had almost to shout to make himself heard. In the pitch darkness, broken at rare intervals by unreflected patches of blue light, the two men could feel about them the empty desolation of the great deserted boulevard, which the wailing of the wind caused to seem even larger than it was. So painful was the effort of walking that they seemed to progress only with extreme slowness.

Martin rejected the temptation to cross the Seine by the Pont d'Austerlitz, which would have brought them quickly to comparatively sheltered streets. The proximity of the railway stations, the Gare de Lyon and the Gare d'Austerlitz, made the bridge too dangerous. There were apt to be too many police about, with police cyclists constantly crossing the bridge, to say nothing of patrols and German constabulary who at that late hour would look suspiciously at the suitcases. They decided that they would follow the embankment as far as the Île Saint-Louis, which meant over half a mile of unsheltered going in the full blast of the wind. Turning their backs on the station they went along the Quai Saint-Bernard, passing the Jardin des Plantes. The wind howled through the trees, causing the dead wood to creak. Conversation would have been too exhausting. Martin had time to think collectedly over the business in the cellar. To his surprise he found that Jamblic's attitude had annoyed him even more than that of the ram, and in the light of this discovery Grandgil's case took on a new aspect. By putting him in a position that was in many respects humiliating, his associate had done him both insult and injury, but perhaps his idea had been simply to establish a fair proportion between the excessive gains of a black-market profiteer and the narrowly reckoned reward of two underlings who ran the greater risk. To rob the robber may pass for an act of justice, and to any disinterested spectator the episode in the cellar might be not lacking in an element of humour in which morality was

avenged. But this was valid only from Grandgil's point of view. Martin, for his part, saw nothing immoral or scandalous in the black-market traffic and its reputedly enormous profits. Theft and mere illegality were in his eyes two distinct things, having nothing in common, that he recognised, except that both were punishable by law. But Grandgil, taking a different view, might consider that he was levying a just tax on an exploiter of famine conditions. The truth was that everyone does the best he can for himself according to his means, and is a fool if he does not take advantage of any chance that offers, and of his own superiority over others. But the less well equipped resent having to pay tribute in sweat and money to cunning and audacity. They have not the sense to see that injustice, in the first instance, resides in the victim. This was something that Martin knew. As an honest man, and you'd have had to look a long way to find one more honest, he asked nothing better than a chance to grow rich on the black market. But he had not been able to become more than a small employee, a modest odd-job man, delivering undercover consignments or selling stuff at fourth hand, climbing the stairs to offer goods by the pound to embittered and needy middle-class households. Where he was concerned, he reflected, injustice was in his own fat and too orderly head and in his heart, which was too small to dare and desire with sufficient ardour. That was the truth of it, he was too well-behaved. Grandgil, although he lacked his intelligence—a heavy sort of chap, with no manners and about as much conversation as a flat-iron—was a different type. He did not give a damn for reason and order. He saw injustice, not in the victim but in the exploiter. Perhaps he didn't worry about it one way or the other. And perhaps he was right.

As they passed along the railings of the Halle aux Vins Martin thought he felt a change in the air. It seemed to him that the wind was blowing less violently across the river, but that it was colder and harder. It bit and burned the right



sides of their faces, and their hands gripping the suitcases were frozen stiff.

Directly they set foot on the *île Saint-Louis*, instinctively and without discussion they turned into a lateral street to escape the wind's assault. After the buffeting they had endured the icy draught that flowed along it seemed to them like a summer breeze, and the comparative silence of these sheltered surroundings was a strange and disconcerting surprise to their ears. Feeling their way a short distance along it, they took refuge in a doorway and set down their burdens. It was as though they had entered a shuttered room.

'Why do you do this job?' asked Grandgil.

'It's the way I get my living. You have to do what you can.'

'It's not what you'd call a bed of roses. Plodding along the streets with a couple of suitcases weighing a ton and the wind cutting you in half. And all this for the sake of a small-time spiv who's scared out of his pants. You ought to be able to find something a bit better, a shrewd chap like you.'

Grandgil spoke in a calm, detached voice, but Martin seemed to catch echoes which made him think of the gleam of mockery in the small, screwed-up pig's eyes.

'Have you anything better to offer?'

'You ought to go into business on your own account. In these days one can sell anything.'

'And what do I use for money to make a start? Are you going to give me some?'

'You might start by selling this pig of Jamblier's; and then you could do the same by a few more of your customers.'

'That's enough of that.'

'If it gives you a guilty conscience you can pay them all back when you're a millionaire.'

'I tell you that's enough.'

The conversation was taking a dangerous turn. Martin felt that they ought to move off again at once. To pause and

rest, he reflected, is to have leisure to take account of the effort and the weariness, and then you start thinking; but so long as you keep on the go you're simply a part of the job. But suddenly the question which he had intended to reserve until the expedition was over slipped from his lips:

'Look—between you and me, what were you playing at, back there in the cellar?'

'I didn't do so badly, did I? I managed to pocket five thousand without exactly rupturing myself.'

'Yes, but what about the way you did it? It would have been all right if you'd been dealing with Jamblier on your own. But I was there too, and I was the one that took you there.'

The ram did not answer. Fearing that he might be putting a wrong interpretation on his last words, Martin said carefully:

'You needn't think I'm asking for a share. On the contrary . . .'

He had, in fact, hoped that Grandgil would offer him a share, not because he was in the least disposed to accept it, but because the gesture was inseparable from the almost honourable motives which he had just been attributing to his act of blackmail. But Grandgil had not so much as hinted at an offer which would now have been purely a matter of form. Martin felt humiliated, with a sense of having been tricked a second time. He would have liked to be able to see the ram's face at that moment, and he pictured it creased in an ironical half-smile, the thought of which infuriated him.

'I said, on the contrary,' he repeated in a voice containing a restrained threat. 'There's only one way I can work, and that's honestly. Come on, let's go.'

As they crossed by the Pont Marie to the right bank of the river Martin had cause for anxiety. The wind, although it had grown colder, was decidedly less strong. The clouds

above them, hitherto invisible, were now edged with silver. Above the Hôtel de Ville a few stars had appeared in a patch of sky that was still small and also bordered with silver. It was to be feared that in a little while the moon would emerge, which would make their task more difficult. The shadows cast by moonlight seemed denser than total darkness, and were more apt to harbour the unexpected. Cross-roads were particularly dangerous. In those moon-flooded spaces the attention of even the most casual observer was likely to be caught by the furtive shadow of the passer-by, which leapt to the eye like that of a dancer in the round glare of the spotlight.

They had been about five minutes making their way through the narrow streets of the Saint-Gervais quarter when Grandgil put down his cases and said

‘Do you mind if we talk for a minute?’

‘I’m listening,’ said Martin, setting down his own load. ‘But hurry it up. We can’t go stopping at every street corner.’

‘I just wanted to know how much a kilo of pork fetches these days on the black market.’

‘That’s not your business.’

‘I don’t know how the prices go,’ Grandgil went on in that placid voice in which at times Martin thought he caught an undertone of cool jesting ‘I’m not in the picture. But I suppose the price would be round about a hundred and fifty francs.’

‘I tell you it’s not your business.’

‘For instance, that café where we were this afternoon, where they took us for cops I’m sure we could sell them the whole of this pig at a hundred and fifty a kilo. That would be at least fifteen thousand to split between us—money for old rope. The café isn’t far off. Instead of walking all the way to Montmartre . . .’

Martin was visited by temptation, but only for an instant.

His feeling of resentment at the ram's behaviour was in itself a sufficient protection.

'Come on,' said Grandgil. 'We've wasted enough time already.'

'You're green, that's what you are,' said Martin. 'You don't know you're born yet. Dressed the way you are, and with that sly look about you, it's just plain silliness to think you could walk in and start selling meat wholesale. Anyone would see you coming a mile off, a tramp like you, wearing those clothes. You wouldn't get a bean for your pig. People would say, either it's hi-jacked or else it's rotten.'

He thought with some satisfaction of his own hat with its curly brim and his tight-fitting overcoat.

'It might be different if I did it. But now you listen. If I'd wanted to do it I wouldn't have come looking for you, my lad. And if I wanted to do it at this minute I'd start by counting you out.'

'But I happen to be on the spot, if you don't mind my mentioning it. I'm in on the deal.'

'All this is just for the sake of argument,' observed Martin. 'But if you did take it into your head to start something I wouldn't think twice about teaching you manners.'

'It sounds as though you thought I was paralysed in both arms.'

'I'd start by putting you to sleep pretty smartly, young fellow. And I'd do it in a way that'd cure you of wanting to be a big shot, young fellow.'

The subject was then dropped for the time being. The ram did not permit himself so much as a chuckle, but quietly fell into step with his companion. Martin could suppose that he had tamed him. Nevertheless he remained on his guard, finding it hard to believe that the audacious young man would surrender at the first threat. The moon was still hidden, but the night had grown lighter. Buried in darkness, the outlines of the lower part of the street, and the

intersecting streets, were faintly perceptible, and the two men could distinguish each other's form. They were walking in step, one behind the other. Martin was suddenly conscious of a change of rhythm. Looking round he saw that his companion was crossing the street towards the fringe of blue light framing the door of a café.

'I'm going to have a drink,' said the ram's calm voice.

He had already opened the door and was starting to go in with his two suitcases. Martin had no time to say anything, scarcely even to think. He paused for an instant, listening to the silence of the town, and then joined Grandgil in the entrance. Burdened with the suitcases they moved awkwardly, and they were obliged to draw aside the black-out curtain, hanging behind the door, for an appreciable time while they passed through. The splashes of released light were reflected half-way across the street, causing the anxious proprietor of the establishment to raise his voice in indignation at the slowness of their entrance, which looked almost as though it were deliberate. The sight of the suitcases added to his ill-humour.

'It's my closing time,' he grunted. 'You've chosen a fine time to walk in here with all that stuff.'

He was staring suspiciously at the cases.

'Have you come in here because the police are after you? If that's your idea, I may as well tell you—'

'Let's have some hot wine,' Grandgil interrupted.

'There's none left.'

'We want some hot wine.'

Without raising his voice the ram had given it a ring of command. Impressed by the assurance of this ugly-looking customer, who was possibly armed, the *Patronne* glanced sideways at his wife, who sat between the cash-desk and the sink, knitting a sock. She answered with a nod, and he went through a low doorway into an annex. Martin, privately disapproving of Grandgil's truculent manner, kept his mouth

shut. A party of card players, seated round a wooden table, having just finished their game, were staring at the two men and whispering among themselves. All four were young men, clerks or shop assistants. They were clearly interested in the suitcases, seeming to weigh their contents with a gleam of malevolence in their half-starved eyes. Martin was in a hurry to get out of the place. With its bulging plastered walls, its dirty floor and shoddy furnishings, the low, narrow room had an aspect of exaggeratedly sordid intimacy, like that of an over-realistic stage setting. Seated beside a small iron stove a thin, yellow-eyed man in a black jacket and stiff collar was scribbling rapidly on a sheet of paper which he kept half-hidden with one arm, occasionally glancing suspiciously about him without raising his head. He might have been playing the part of the indispensable traitor, or of the crafty and pitiless police agent who is biding his time. Recollections of the Belleville theatre and the melodramas of his youth came to Martin's mind. It occurred to him that the character of the ram was not the least mysterious. That strange face was at once impenetrable and transparent. The smile that gleamed constantly in his little pig's eyes, spreading over his whole countenance, seemed to conceal a secret. This light of irony may sometimes be seen on the faces of the dead, seeming to emanate from their closed lids, but Grandgil's mask also proclaimed a sort of frankness, arbitrary and indecent. Martin, ill at ease, sought in vain to explain or reconcile this contrast. Recalling the events in the cellar, he tried to picture an abyss of anarchy behind that ram's face, the seething rancours and lusts of the social outcast, but the man escaped him. He seemed to perceive some other thing in him, no less singular, that was beyond his understanding. Grandgil, for his part, was surveying him without a trace of hostility, with a sort of precise curiosity which seemed to concern itself as much with his clothes and the curled brim of his hat as with his face; and this lively gaze,

that did not pause to dwell upon anything, was highly disconcerting.

'Drink up quickly,' said the *patron*, bringing their wine. 'I'm closing in a minute. It's nearly eleven.'

The card-players had risen. As they filed slowly past the counter their gaze went from the two men to the four suitcases, concerning which they exchanged sarcastic remarks in low voices. One of them grew bold and after prodding one of the cases with his toe, took it by the handle to test its weight.

'Keep your hands off it,' said Grandgil. 'The stuff in there isn't for the poor.'

Flushing with humiliation the man let go the handle. The others had paused for no particular reason.

'Well, what are you waiting for?' asked Grandgil. 'Why don't you grab them? You eat sausages made of sawdust, you drink tap-water and you smoke dried dung—and there's enough in these cases to fill your bellies for three weeks. There are four of you, able-bodied men. So why the hell don't you just take them? You know perfectly well no one will go to the police.'

Embarrassed rather than annoyed, the four remained silent, glancing towards the door.

'For Christ's sake clear out, you poor, gutless clods,' said Grandgil. 'Go and scream your heads off about the black market.'

He burst into a loud laugh, exposing his teeth to view, and Martin was amazed to discover that no fewer than five or six of them were gold. He found this the more remarkable since, in his eyes, gold teeth were an adornment rather than objects of use. Although his own teeth were exceptionally good, he had long dreamed of having a few pulled out in order to decorate his mouth with gold. He liked to picture the combined effect, at once opulent and elegant, of a gold-gleaming mouth and his black, curly-brimmed hat. It is by

details of this sort that a man is often judged, to say nothing of the fact that women like to taste material comfort in a kiss. The sight of his dream thus glittering in the ram's mouth afflicted him with a feeling of melancholy, like that of a decayed aristocrat who sees the family jewels displayed on the neck and bosom of an unworthy grocer's wife.

The card-players had left, hurling a volley of abuse as they went out. The scribbler by the stove had also vanished. Standing behind his counter, the *patron* was glaring at them impatiently while his wife bestowed her knitting in the cash-drawer. Martin, no less impatient, had swallowed his wine and paid. But the ram seemed to be in no hurry. After taking a first sip he fished out the packet of cigarettes Jamblier had given him and put one in his mouth. Martin followed his movements with a sort of perverse anxiety, wanting him to give him a further reason for hating him. In this he was not disappointed. Although the cigarettes were their joint property, Grandgil put the packet back in his pocket without the least sign of embarrassment. Nor was it due to forgetfulness on his part. He was watching his companion curiously from beneath lowered lids. Martin felt that it was beneath his dignity to say anything, and while Grandgil was lighting his cigarette he noted something else that had hitherto escaped him. The sleeve of the worn and dirty jacket slipped back to reveal a shirt-cuff of astonishing cleanness, made of fine silken material. At this moment a little girl of about ten, with a scarf wrapped round her head and a black cloak over her shoulders, came into the café and went behind the counter. While she was talking to the *patronne* the cloak fell away from one shoulder, exposing the yellow star, the stigma of the Jews, sewed to her jersey. The sight of it caused Martin to wonder at once whether a round-up of Jews was taking place in the neighbourhood, with numerous police in the streets, both French and German. But the *Patronne*, following his gaze, guessed what was in his mind and



reassured him. The child lived in the same house and had simply come on an errand for her parents. Having thus soothed his customer's apprehensions he felt himself entitled to adopt an attitude of greater familiarity, and nodding towards the suitcases he asked:

'Is it tobacco?'

'No,' said Grandgil. 'It's meat. A fresh carcass of pork and going for next to nothing. I'll sell it to you for a hundred and fifty a kilo.'

'Don't take any notice of him,' said Martin, thinking he saw signs of interest. 'He's raving. The stuff's sold already.'

'Don't worry. I knew he didn't mean it. Anyway, I don't buy stuff like that without knowing what I'm doing. The price isn't everything. You have to be sure that everything's in order. I could pick up plenty of bargains if I liked, but in my position you have to be careful. Mark you, I lose money by it, but I'd sooner have a clear conscience.'

'Apart from which,' said Grandgil in a stern voice, 'you allow Jews in here. A public establishment. At eleven o'clock at night! It's a scandal! You deserve to be denounced, just to teach you. I've a good mind to do it myself.'

The little girl had gathered her cloak round her and was hurrying towards the door. The *patron* and his wife, suddenly alarmed, avoided the ram's eyes and stood motionless and silent, gazing elsewhere, like soldiers being unjustly brow-beaten by a superior.

'Don't take any notice,' said Martin. 'He's only pulling your leg.'

The ram drank the last of his wine and with head thrown back and attentive eyes observed the demeanour of the pair. Gaiety drew two creases of laughter close by his temples, running from the corners of his eyes.

'I find it revolting that people should have so little sense of duty,' he went on in the same tone. 'What's the point of

having laws if they aren't obeyed? Nothing but spivs and dirty little racketeers everywhere. I'd clap the whole lot in prison. No mercy. In the clink and keep 'em there. Crooks, anarchists, fifth-columnists . . .'

'Turn it up!' said Martin. 'You're killing us with your wisecracks.'

'Nuts to you! How old are you, you two?'

The *Patronne* and his wife received the question in dignified silence, eyes averted and lips pursed.

'Hell and damnation, I asked you what age you are!' bellowed the ram. 'I want your family history, the whole works. And look smart about it!'

His expression had changed. A sudden fury, incomprehensible to Martin, blazed in his little pig's eyes and caused his nostrils to quiver.

'Fifty-one last November,' said the *Patronne*. 'My wife, Lucienne, was forty-nine in April. Married at Courbevoie in 1927. No children. Employed at the Halle aux Vins until 1937. No police record. Military service. . . .'

'That'll do. I know it all already. And, my God, look at your cretinous faces and your lamentable bodies! Sweet, isn't he, with his alcoholic's mug and his grey, flabby flesh and his fat cheeks crawling with stupidity! How long's it going on? Will you manage to change your face some day? And look at her, the old jezebel, the bitch! Dignity carved in blubber, with her three chins and her great fat tits hanging down to her navel! Fifty years old, both of them, fifty years of buggar-all! Fifty and fifty and fifty thousand! What are you doing on earth, either of you? Aren't you ashamed to be alive? Not on your life they aren't! Here they are, nice and cosy! They shove their greasy living under your nose, they puff it in your face, they poison the air with it. They turn everything foul, even colours. Look at the rouge on the lady's cheeks, like squashed bugs smeared over a bag of pus! White, violet, yellow, grey, when I see them on his dingy

face I can't stomach them any longer, I want to be sick. Thieves, murderers, give me back the colours!'

'Where does he get all this stuff? I must say, he's funny!' said Martin, who was indeed laughing.

'I've never stolen anything,' protested the proprietor. 'Not a halfpenny, ever, I give you my word. And Lucienne's the same.'

'Shut up, you ape!' said Grandgil. 'But you, Martin, I'll love you all my life, you and your black hat. I'm not fooling, I love you dearly. So why don't you spit at the pair of them? Go on, spit in their eye, you've every right. Look how they're inciting you. Kick him in the belly and help yourself to his wife!'

Martin was laughing so much that he could not have spat if he had wanted to. The ram seized his empty tumbler and flung it with all his strength at a row of shelves where it smashed against a full bottle. The couple dared not even turn their heads to see the extent of the damage. While deploring the breakage, Martin laughed more than ever.

'Love of my life,' Grandgil said to him, 'my beauty, my noble one, you're as coy as a shepherdess but I can't resist your charm. I'll carry your cases to Le Havre if you want me to, on foot or on my knees, any way you like and anywhere you like. Now let's go. I never want to see these two again.'

Seizing his two suitcases he started for the door, shouting at the couple over his shoulder:

'Slugs, I forget you for ever. I expunge you from my memory!'

Shreds of cloud were still streaming beneath the stars, but the sky had cleared. On the moon-washed façades across the street the roofs of the houses opposite cast a clear-cut shadow. The points of intersection, stretching into the distance, were so many pools of light in the darkness. Martin walked joyfully, conquered by the ram. He had forgiven him

everything as one forgives a naughty child. He had forgotten the cellar, the betrayals, the cigarettes, the mystery, the gold teeth. In any case, Grandgil now seemed to him less secret, as though he had opened all his windows.

'All the same,' Martin said, after they had gone a little way, 'they hadn't done you any harm. You may say they were an ugly-looking couple, and I agree. But how could they help that? And after all, what does it matter? What's the use of beauty anyway? Half the time it doesn't mean a thing. Anyone who tries to go by appearances——'

'Don't give yourself a headache,' Grandgil interrupted.

His tone was very sharp. Martin did not want to let himself be annoyed. He still forgave the bad child, but his high spirits were damped. Moreover, he had again become aware of his responsibilities, and the brightness of the moonlight worried him. He did not like to ask Grandgil to put out his cigarette, which might attract notice.

'Those gold teeth of yours, have you had them long?'

'About two years.'

'In fact, since the Occupation? They must have cost you something!'

Grandgil did not answer. He had fallen into a bad mood. He could not get his sense of direction in this labyrinth of small streets around the Archives through which he was being led, and he felt lost in consequence. Martin noted with satisfaction that he had him a little at his mercy, and he was inclined to suppose that he therefore need not fear his capricious humours. For his own part, he could find his way through that maze of the Marais as readily by night as in broad daylight. After living more than five years in the Rue de Saintonge, he was familiar with even the smallest streets in the *quartier*. He would have liked to tell his companion something of its especial peculiarities and amenities, pointing as they passed to cafés he had long frequented, but he had a feeling that the background of his daily life would not

interest him. Grandgil's gold teeth, his fine linen and the way he had talked in the café seemed to put him in a separate compartment of humanity, of the nature of which Martin had some inkling although he could not precisely define it. Of course when he called himself a house-painter it was simply an alibi. He was a chap who obviously had no regular calling, but at the same time he wasn't an ordinary crook or a professional blackmailer. His success in the cellar had been quite fortuitous. On the other hand, a man who lives by his wits, probably on a rather shabby level, does not have a mouth filled with gold or wear shirts of the highest quality. .

The two men walked on without speaking. Martin felt lonely and rather regretted his hatred and his anger. Their nearness to his dwelling finally caused him to think of Mariette, and he recalled the things he had said to Grandgil when the latter had come to the Rue Saintonge that evening to accompany him to Jamblier's cellar. ". . . 'I'm fond of you', she said to me, 'and I think a whole lot of you, but it's no use, I have to be independent, I have to come and go as I please without any man wanting to know what I'm doing or where I've been.'"

'So I said to her, "Now you listen to me, Mariette", I said, "I'm not trying to tie you to the foot of the bed. There's plenty of men in my place would give you a good sock on the jaw, but I'm not like that. A woman's only a woman, but I believe in respecting her feelings. Only I'm warning you, you'd better think what you're doing. You don't do so badly out of me. There's plenty of grub and drinks and the pictures, and when it comes to love and all that you'd have to look a long way before you got anything better." . . . "Why, who do you think you are?" she says to me. "When it comes to lovers, let me tell you, I've only got to raise my little finger." She was sitting there on the end of the table, sort of looking down over herself and looking at me at the

same time. And so then I lost my temper and I let her have it right on the puss "You dirty swine," she says, "I'll tell my lover about that."

With the conclusion of his recital the inevitable question arose, so often repeated, as to whether she would come back.

'Do you think she'll come back to me?' he asked suddenly aloud.

'Who?'

'You know who I mean, Mariette I told you about her'

'What's it got to do with me?'

'I was just asking.'

'How old is this floozy of yours?'

'Fifty-five,' said Martin simply

'She'll be back'

'Mark you, she doesn't look a day over forty-five Wonderful figure, she's got, wonderful curves, as much breasts as anyone could want, and as for her bottom—well, she's what I call a real woman'

'Yes well, in that case it'll be a pity if she doesn't come back But then on the other hand she isn't exactly young If I were you I'd take this chance to break it off She'll be getting creaky before long—rheumatics and so forth And she sounds a bit touchy, from what you tell me'

'All the same, I love her, and that's all there is about it'

'Well, don't let it get you down, you'll be seeing her. However many curves they've got, it isn't so easy to find a man who'll keep them, particularly at fifty-five She'll come back without being fetched'

'Mind you,' said Martin, not altogether pleased by this prospect of a return from sordid motives, 'it wasn't money she was thinking about when we moved in together It's true I earn my living, but for a woman who likes a bit of luxury it's nothing special I don't want to boast, but the truth is, she liked me for myself And what's more, I'm sure she still does.'

'Well, that's fine. You hold all the cards. So what are you beefing about?'

Feeling that Grandgil was bored with the subject, Martin nursed his unhappiness and his speculations in silence. While he was ruminating he thought for an instant that he heard the sound of footsteps coming towards them, but when he listened he heard it no more. Grandgil had just thrown away his cigarette. They were coming to a crossing, and the darkness which sheltered them was broken by a swathe of moonlight five or six yards wide. As they approached the opposite pavement a voice came out of the shadows a few paces ahead of them. It said sharply, with a pronounced accent of the Midi:

'Stop. What's in those suitcases?'

'Before you talk to us like that,' said Martin, 'you might tell us who you are.'

Directly the man spoke he had distinguished the figure of a policeman, silhouetted against the light-coloured shutters of a shop; but by affecting ignorance he could ignore the order to stop and gain a few seconds in which to get out of the pathway of moonlight, which had put them at a disadvantage.

'This is police. You can see, all right. Don't try and be clever.'

'Well, if you say so, of course I believe you. As a matter of fact, I'm very glad we've run into you. I was just looking round for someone to tell me the way to the Rue Sévigné.'

'You're coming away from it.'

'What—honest? D'you hear that, mate? We're coming away from the Rue Sévigné. You're the one who said it was this way.'

Grandgil should now have played his part by denying this and starting an argument with Martin, putting the policeman in the important and flattering position of mediator, and generally inducing an atmosphere of friendly

informality. But Grandgil did not understand, and said nothing.

‘I’ll show you the way in good time,’ said the policeman. ‘But first you’ll have to come along to the station.’

He was a gloomy and finicky Southerner who probably found in the exercise of his official functions a means of petty revenge on life. Martin saw that this was going to be difficult.

‘Listen, officer,’ he cried. ‘I’m not going to tell you any lies. Here’s what happened. This morning I decided I’d go and look over a little estate I have in Verrières. As a matter of fact, there isn’t much for me to do there at this time of year, but my wife wanted me to go and I didn’t like to upset her, particularly as she’s expecting a baby at the end of next month. You know what women are like when they’re in that state. I daresay you’re married yourself?’

‘I’m married,’ said the policeman, with no great amiability. ‘but I haven’t any children.’

‘Well, I must say, I don’t blame you. There’s more worry than satisfaction to be got out of children, the way things are at present. I ought to know, seeing I’ve got five. But still, there they are, and you have to make the best of it. Anyway, I got to Verrières at exactly eleven o’clock this morning. My servant met me at the station as usual, and——’

‘Do you mean this man here?’ asked the policeman.

‘That’s him. He’s not much to look at, I admit, but he’s loyal. You might not think it, but he’s been with the family ever since he was fifteen.’

‘I can see how it is,’ said the policeman. ‘A good lad, but a bit simple, eh?’

He uttered a laugh of indulgent understanding. Martin put down his suitcases on the pavement. The ram, slightly flexing his legs, did the same. As he straightened himself he swung his fist at the policeman’s jaw and the policeman crumpled at the knees and fell on his face without uttering a



sound. Grandgil bent over him, ran his hands over his tunic and then, seizing the cap that was still on his head, flung it a dozen yards away into the middle of the street. The polished peak shone in the moonlight.

'Make it snappy,' said Martin, who, submerged in the darkness that covered the pavement, had guessed rather than seen what had happened.

Picking up the cases they broke into a run, neither saying a word, concerned only to get away down the nearest side-street, which was to the left. This was flooded with moonlight and they ran one behind the other, keeping close to the house walls to make use of the rim of shadow that flanked the houses. Not until they had turned another corner did Martin say what he thought of the proceedings.

'Well, that was fine, just bloody marvellous, and I hope you're proud of yourself! It shouldn't take them any time to catch up with us now, and I suppose you know what it means, assaulting a cop. For Christ's sake, hurry!'

'I don't know what you're in such a state about. That bird'll be out for quite a while.'

'Yes? And the moment he opens one eye he'll be grabbing for his whistle, and in five minutes we'll have every copper in the district after us.'

'I shall be surprised if that happens. I've got his whistle in my pocket.'

Martin could not help admiring the man's presence of mind, but he took care not to show it. He was furious with him for having dealt with a tricky situation by taking action on his own initiative. 'Treating me like that in my own quarter!' Panting hard, he restrained his wrath in order to save his breath and keep up the pace, while he kept thinking that he heard the footsteps of countless policemen at his back.

'We don't have to kill ourselves,' said Grandgil. 'There's not a sound.'

'If there's a bunch of cyclists waiting for us round the

next corner you needn't think they'll let us know by blowing a trumpet!

'Stop fussing. That's all over now. It couldn't have turned out better.'

'Except that, thanks to you, I'm liable to be picked up in my own quarter. A hell of a lot you care. In another five minutes I'd have had that copper eating out of my hand. I suppose that's what annoyed you.'

'No, it wasn't that. I just wanted to have a bit of fun, if you see what I mean.'

'What? Listen, are you trying to make a fool out of me?'

'You know, you're getting to be a bit boring,' said Grandgil with a sigh.

'Is that so? Well, I'm getting a bit bored, too, with your bloody superior way of talking. I daresay it's a lot of fun, amusing yourself at someone else's expense. And it's nice to have a lot of gold teeth. But there's such a thing as being on the up-and-up and keeping to the rules.'

'Look, if you're going to burst into tears I shall leave you here with your suitcases.'

'I'd like to see you try.'

'It's just what you will see. You'll see me stroll off in the moonlight with my hands in my pockets. I must say, it's no surprise to me that your Mariette walked out on you. Fuss, fuss, fuss—no wonder she got fed up with it. Cuties of fifty-five like a man to be a bit playful now and then. It looks to me as though you just weren't her type.'

One of Grandgil's cases bumped against something in the darkness. Martin had dropped his own, and he turned to face him, shouting:

'Put that bloody thing down and we'll have it out. I've had all I can take from you. The coppers can get me if they like, but by God, I'll teach you a lesson first!'

Breathless with running and stifled with rage, he charged, head down, almost blindly; Grandgil caught one wrist and

managed to get hold of the other after having taken two heavy punches in the ribs. Martin tried to wrench himself free. His wrists were gripped by immensely powerful hands that allowed them no freedom of movement and threatened to break them the more he twisted. Beside himself with fury he butted his adversary's chest with his head. Grandgil retreated, laughing, until his back was against the wall of a house. Martin, bent nearly double, went on insanely butting and stamping as though he hoped to drive him into the wall itself, making such frenzied efforts that the seams of his overcoat parted between the shoulder-blades while a sort of rhythmical barking sound accompanied his lunges.

'Gently!' said Grandgil. 'The way you're going on you'll push the house over. Have a nice time, but don't hurt yourself.'

Finally, using the leverage of the wall, he thrust Martin off balance with a single movement and pushed him back to the suitcases.

'We ought to be getting on,' he said gently, after letting go his wrists. 'It's late, you know, and we haven't got there yet.'

'I've lost my hat,' muttered Martin.

Using a pocket torch, Grandgil went in search of the curly-brimmed hat, which had fallen into the gutter. After brushing it with his hand and squeezing it back into shape he restored it to the head of its owner, who was standing motionless, head bent and arms hanging.

'Come on,' said the ram. 'The worst is still to come. After we've crossed the boulevards there's a steep diagonal to climb. You'll have to do the thinking for both of us.'

Martin picked up his cases. The sky was an icy blue, glittering with stars and moonlight. As they approached the Porte Saint-Martin the figures of pedestrians appeared in the moonlit spaces and the footsteps of women in wooden-soled shoes echoed through the night. On the threshold of

the boulevards the two men had to stop to allow a squad of German soldiers on bicycles to pass. The cyclists, with rifles slung over their shoulders, swept silently by in the direction of the Opéra. They were entering a dangerous zone. It was necessary above all to steer clear of certain buildings requisitioned by the German Army, the approaches to which were guarded by police. They followed a zig-zag route intended to bring them, by way of the Porte Saint-Denis and Rochechouart districts, to the neighbourhood of the Cirque Médrano. At twenty to twelve they reached the Square Montholon and began to struggle up the steep slope of the hill of Montmartre. There was a distant sound of A.A. fire in the west. Since crossing the boulevards they had been obliged several times to take shelter in dark corners to avoid foot and cycle police. Twice, indeed, they had come near to being caught. At these moments of crisis Martin, to his despair, had failed to rise to the occasion, and it was Grandgil's extreme coolness and authority that had made good his deficiencies. Grandgil seemed now to be the real leader of the expedition; as though without thinking he had assumed command. Martin made no attempt to oppose his decisions, but now and then he obeyed them with a deliberate slowness, as though hoping for the failure of the enterprise, perhaps because he considered it no longer his own.

'The climb was heavy going after the distance they had come. Grandgil matched his pace to that of Martin, whose laboured movements betrayed his exhaustion. The sound of the A.A. guns rumbled distantly from several points of the compass, in heavy, intermittent bursts that were growing more frequent. If there should be an alert in the town itself the police patrols would be increased, and they would be harder to distinguish amid the movements of the Passive Defence.

'If you weren't so badly dressed,' Martin grunted, 'we could go into a shelter. It's quite normal to go down into a

cellar carrying suitcases. But the way you're got up, people would take you for a thief.'

'It's true, I do look a bit of a tough. But if the alert sounds while we're near the Boulevard Rochechouart we can go to my place. I live quite near.'

They had just reached the Avenue Trudaine when the sirens sounded.

The studio was large and comfortable. Grandgil drew blue serge curtains over the big windows, and after putting on a dressing-gown looked inside the stove, which was still warm. There was nothing left but hot ashes. Martin had put down his suitcases. He stood by the door, gazing about him with curious, hostile eyes that missed nothing. Wardrobe, clothes-press, easels, divan, armchairs, tables—each object seemed to afford him food for thought. Grandgil in a friendly voice invited him to sit down. Martin did not move. He nodded towards a table by the window on which were scattered a number of pastel drawings bearing Grandgil's signature, all of half-naked women, breasts displayed or undergarments pulled up round their thighs. One was quite naked, wearing nothing but high-heeled shoes and a top-hat on her red head.

'Did you do those?'

'Yes, I did them. I sell them to the shops on the Place du Tertre and other places. There are always customers for that sort of thing. And since the Occupation I've exchanged a good many on the black market. Yesterday I swopped a nude for a ham. But I don't do as many as I used to. With a bit of luck I may be able to drop that line of business altogether.'

Martin continued to contemplate the drawings for a moment and then moved towards the centre of the studio.

'What about this?'

He nodded towards an easel on which was an urban landscape, painted in oils, which might have been inspired by the one they had gazed at together, that afternoon from behind

the windows of the café on the Boulevard de la Bastille. Martin saw nothing in it but a rather confused pattern. Nevertheless the drawing was sharp. A black line, heavy as the leading of a stained-glass window, bordered the principal masses, but the colour, largely overflowing the outlines, formed a strange contrasting harmony with the design, scarcely coinciding with it except by accident. The canvas was signed 'Giloulin'.

'That?' said Grandgil. 'That's my real work, my love and my headache. My canvases are beginning to sell, but I do them to please myself, and to hell with the critics and the dealers. I don't care whether they like them or not. It's my guts that go into those things, my heart and my own truth.'

He was speaking with a warmth and vehemence to which he had scarcely accustomed Martin. The light from the small eyes in the ram's face was no longer one of mockery but of exaltation, of passionate, imperious joy. He went and fetched the framed portrait of a woman and set it up on the easel. The painter's intention was here more clearly discernible than in the grey tones of the landscape. The woman was seated at a window, her silhouette brought into solid relief by a heavy outline. A flood of red light, radiating from a bunch of tulips, illuminated one half of her face, while the blue of the sky cast upon her forehead a tender glow that seemed to spring from the blue of her eyes. The colours which, so to speak, really belonged to her face, overflowed on to the panes of the window where they formed patterns of light.

'Do you like this one?'

'To hell with it,' said Martin in a tone of cold ferocity.

Grandgil's expression changed. The flame of enthusiasm died down in the little pig's eyes, which became charged with melancholy. But his face brightened almost instantly, shining with that light of irony in which he seemed to find his safest poise.

'Perhaps you prefer Grandgil to Gilouin? But you needn't answer. You'd probably end by saying that you don't give a damn for either of them, or for me either, and I should be sorry about that. We'll stick to the suitcases. Until we've got them to the butcher there's a life-and-death compact between us.'

He got Jamblier's five thousand-franc notes out of his pocket and held them out to Martin.

'While I think of it, you can give these back to the fool who let them get away from him. He'll be pleased.'

Martin took the notes and put them carefully in his wallet.

'When we reach the butcher's I'll pay you the four-fifty I agreed with Jamblier,' he said.

'I'll see you don't forget. Now sit down. I'll warm some coffee while we're waiting for the All Clear.'

Martin seated himself in an armchair. While he was left alone he tried to sum up his impressions and his grievances, but weariness and a certain disgust, which was like an evil taste of life in his mouth, dulled his wits and prevented him from reaching any conclusion. The return of the five thousand francs, which had been the original cause of his resentment, should have done the ram credit in his eyes; but far from being appeased, Martin was irritated by the unexpected gesture as though by an act of treachery. Grandgil's behaviour had done him no serious harm; his vague and inconsistent sense of grievance was engendered principally by an attitude, a way of being. Bound up with his resentment there was also an irritating curiosity regarding that air of sustained mockery behind which Grandgil entrenched himself, and the mystery of a duplicity that was again apparent in the dual nature of his work. The history of their encounter now seemed to him a series of equivocations and uncertainties. In the end he fell asleep with a feeling that he had been betrayed.

Returning to the studio Grandgil paused to study his slumbering companion. Martin was snoring, his mouth

half-open, his hands flat on the arms of the chair, his head and body very straight and his black hat thrust back a little. Grandgil drew quietly nearer, opened a sketch-book and began to draw. With a firm, almost unbroken line he first outlined the head and shoulders, and then, with the same slow but sure precision, he brought Martin's round face to life. He appeared satisfied with what he had done. Not only had he achieved a good likeness, but he felt that by means of this simple sketch he had contrived to express something of Martin's moral personality, which hitherto he had sensed and almost understood without being able to define it. As he looked at his drawing he seemed to discern the true nature of a man's honesty: a sense of loyalty to himself, governed by the esteem in which he holds his own image as it is reflected back to him by the mirror of human society. This, he reflected, was what it amounted to in the case of Martin and in all cases of average good faith. For his own part, holding himself to be an honest man, he had the conviction of obeying a more pure imperative which did not need that mirror and made use of it only rarely and simply as a reference. For his amusement he completed the sketch by drawing the big, silver horseshoe in Martin's tie, and he wrote the date at the foot of the page. As he closed the sketch-book the telephone rang. Martin awoke, looked about him in astonishment and settled his hat more firmly on his head. The telephone was on a small table a yard or two from his chair.

'Louise?' Grandgil was saying. 'Good evening, my dear. . . . No, I wasn't here. I've been on a little outing, disguised as a gangster. . . . It's quite true. You mustn't laugh. I've got some very fine loot. . . . I've been playing at being a real, honest-to-God tough guy—it was great fun. . . . No, not in the least. On the contrary, it's very easy—too easy. It's the soft at heart who act tough. I always thought as much. . . . What? . . . Oh, not as bad as that. Just a bit of amateur satanism. I may add that I also played the part of the tempter.'



. . . As a matter of fact, no. I got soft-hearted myself in the end. . . .’

Without putting down the receiver Grandgil turned his head. Martin, standing behind him and staring fixedly at him, said in a low voice:

‘Swine!’

‘I’ll tell you all about it tomorrow,’ Grandgil went on. ‘I hope it’ll amuse you as much as it has me. Although, of course, it’s really pretty depressing. If you like, we could. . . . One moment.’

Martin had grabbed the receiver and was trying to wrench it away from him.

‘I’d like to say a word to that tart of yours.’

Grandgil let him have it and cut off the call by pressing down the cradle. Martin flung the white telephone violently on the floor and smashed it.

‘I’ve got it now, you bastard. You’ve just been making a fool of me all along. I thought you were on the rocks and I wanted to do you a good turn, and all the time there you were, laughing your bloody guts out. And that was robbery in itself. You could have refused the job and left it for some poor sod that needed it. But not you! You thought you’d like to see Paris by night, eh? You thought you might get a kick out of it. Now that all the spots in the Rue de Lappe are closed one has to do something, hasn’t one? Let’s hear you say that again about playing at being tough! Go on, let’s hear you say it!’

‘Martin, don’t be angry. I’ll explain why . . .’

Grandgil would have liked to clear himself of the crime of diletantism, the most outrageous and the least forgivable in the eyes of a working-man, exaggeratedly conscious of the importance of his actions, if not of his function. ‘No,’ he thought, ‘it was not pure frivolity that took me to that cellar, but an impulse of serious and human curiosity; and it was the same curiosity that caused me to play that

trick on Jamblier, the same desire to get below the surface and discover the truth of the matter, by turning the whole thing inside out.<sup>1</sup> But he did not find it easy to justify himself with such arguments, knowing in his heart that there had been an element of foolery as well, or at least the search for an artist's pleasure.

'I don't want you to explain anything,' shouted Martin. 'Anyway, there's nothing to explain. You amused yourself like a whore, without caring what happened. Like a whore! I have to work for a living, and it doesn't come too easy. You played around with my work, and you did everything you could to muck it up for me.'

'Don't be an idiot,' said Grandgil sharply. 'I've done my share of the work and Jamblier isn't going to lose anything.'

'That's not what I'm talking about. You played around with my work.'

'For God's sake stop nattering about your work! I don't mind you wearing a black hat with a curly brim, but now you're talking as though you wore a bowler.'

Grandgil moved away, shrugging his shoulders. Martin made a half-turn. His gaze fell first on the table scattered with drawings<sup>2</sup> of half-naked girls and then travelled to the portrait of the woman on the easel. Making no mistake he ran to the easel with his clasp-knife gripped firmly in his hand. He thrust the point into the sky and cut the picture diagonally across, and then he slashed it from the opposite corner.

'I can fool with other people's work, too. . . .'

He stooped to pick up the landscape resting against the foot of the easel, but by that time Grandgil was upon him. While they were struggling the sirens sounded the All Clear, and Martin never heard the cry his night's companion uttered as the knife entered his stomach.

<sup>1</sup>The butcher offered him a cold meal, but all Martin wanted was a glass of wine.<sup>2</sup> Having gulped it down he sat motionless

on the chair on to which he had let himself fall when he entered the room at the back of the shop. The butcher was saying that he could not imagine how a single man could have managed the steepest part of the climb carrying a load of over two hundred pounds. Martin made no reply to his exclamations of astonishment. He sat watching his hands shake with exhaustion, still feeling on his neck and shoulders the pressure of the leather strap with which he had girt the suitcases about him, two on either side. During the journey from the studio to the butcher's shop, a beast of burden wholly concentrated on the effort that was required of him, he had thought of nothing but his muscles. Awareness was now gradually returning to him, still only half clear, clouded by the physical sickness of fatigue. A picture rose sharply to the surface of his memory, taking possession of his thoughts. It was that of the Turkish soldier, killed with a knife-thrust in 1915. More vividly, more truthfully than he had ever done before, Martin recalled the still-warm body lying on its right side, the knees drawn up, the hands clutching at the bloody stomach.

Rebuffed by his silence, the butcher went into the shop to weigh the meat and stow it away in the refrigerator. Martin did not see him go. He was looking at death. At moments the body of Grandgil emerged from that of the Turk, but it vanished instantly. Vaguely conscious of the trick his mind was playing, Martin nevertheless had resort to it to justify his crime: 'It was war. I asked nothing better than to let him go on living. I'm not wicked. It was either him or me. You can't always help yourself in this world. That's the truth. You can't help yourself.' The butcher was telephoning.

'Hullo—Jamblier? Marchandot speaking. The weight's right. . . . I'll put him on. . . . Good night.'

Martin dragged himself to the shop-counter, where the telephone was.

'Yes, it's me. . . . He's dead. . . . He gave me back the money. . . . You mind your own business.'

He hung up and said to the butcher:

'I'm going, but first I'll ask you for an envelope and a stamp.'

He took the notes out of his wallet and put them in the envelope, addressed to Jamblier.

'Another glass of wine?' said the butcher. 'Or a drop of marc? I've some that's very good.'

'No, thanks. May I leave the suitcases here? I'll come and fetch them tomorrow evening between five and six.'

Martin went out, making no reply to the butcher's further courtesies. It was half-past one in the morning. The wind was blowing down the empty streets with subtle variations of tone. Martin walked in the full moonlight, not caring whether he was noticed by the police, or even thinking about it. Nor had he made any attempt at concealment when he left the studio loaded with his four suitcases, but had made his way with no thought of danger through the slight commotion that followed the All Clear.

He was still contemplating that picture of the Turkish soldier. The body had been by itself, lying on an isolated piece of rock as though it were a pedestal, with nothing around it to evoke the battle in which the soldier had lost his life. 'You can't always help yourself,' Martin repeated. But little by little the corpse was becoming two. As in a picture with an over-impression, Grandgil's body was at first no more than a shadowy reflection of that of the soldier, but it was slowly becoming separate. Occasionally, by a sort of closing of his mind, Martin contrived to bring the two images together again, but that of Grandgil at once returned to its own place. The two heads, then the two torsos, became distinct. Finally there were two dead men lying side by side, the soldier in uniform and the painter with his dressing-gown gaping open over his bloodied garments. Grandgil was not

very terrible to look at. Thanks to the presence of the soldier, his death seemed to be a part of the fatality of war. 'You can't always help yourself,' Martin thought again. But suddenly the Turk's body receded to the very fringe of his memory and was lost. The background of the studio took shape around the figure of Grandgil, now lying amid the disorder of the canvases and the overturned easel. Blood flowed from two wounds, one in his stomach and the other in his side, and was soaking into his garments. Over the grey-toned landscape of the Boulevard de la Bastille a splash of red was spreading like a sunset. For the first time since the thing had happened Martin had a sense of being alone with his crime. His first thought was of his concierge. He pictured her face of outrage and realised that he had become an object of horror to society. He reached the crossing of the Rue des Abbesses and the Rue Ravignan, and in the frozen solitude of that open space was suddenly giddy with terror. The face of his concierge was hard. She formed the centre of a group in which he recognised people living on the same floor as himself, shopkeepers from the Rue Saintonge, relations, his brother Henri who had a grocery in a little street in Chartres, his cousins at Ménilmontant, men he worked with and friends of his childhood. They were saying to one another, 'Who would have believed it of Martin?' Mirrored on those faces of the everyday world where he was accustomed to look for the reflection of his own personality, he now saw his murderer's face and foresaw his punishment. The most sociable of men, he was condemned henceforth to be for ever alone beneath the gaze of those unsparing eyes. Between his concierge and himself an immeasurable gulf was fixed. Never again would he dare write to his brother Henri, or go to call on his cousins in Ménilmontant. He would pass former comrades in the street and recognise no one. He would talk without pride to those who employed him. He would bargain no more.

In the deserted Montmartre streets loneliness was hardened by the whiteness of the moonlight. The pools of shadow concealed nothing but despair. Martin forgot Grandgil, and thought only of the criminal he had become. He was walking fast. Had he been less tired he would have run, to escape his solitude and perhaps find himself again in the company of strange men to whom he would also be a stranger. He had entered a region of narrow streets, dark and terrifying. Weak with fear he thought that in the Place Pigalle he would surely find the human presences he needed. More than once he thought he heard the sound of people in the distance, but when he entered the Place it was washed with moonlight and empty. A solitary German soldier was striding rapidly over the pavement. Martin ran after him for a few paces, and the man stopped apprehensively, and turned and asked:

'You wish to speak with me?'

Martin also stopped, then turned away and made off, and for a moment the soldier watched him, muttering:

*'Verrückt, der Mensch.'*

Beneath the moon the Place was desperately naked. The balustrade of the métro, the pavement, the circle of the roundabout, the waterless fountain with its empty basin, all were thrown into a harsh and wounding relief by this mingling of cold whiteness and black shadow. The lifeless place, at the centre of so many lifeless streets, seemed to spread about it an endless emptiness and silence. Martin walked on without hope, but suddenly, when he was halfway across, he heard an unquestionable sound of voices, seeming to come from the Rue Pigalle. He went more quickly. The street was dark. At the edge of the fringe of shadow he saw a man in a black overcoat in conversation with others who were hidden by the darkness. As he approached within a few yards of them, these unknowns fell silent and two policemen emerged from the shadow.

'What are you doing here?' one of them asked.

'I'm on my way home. I got caught by the alert. I was visiting friends, and I was just getting ready to leave when . . .'

In his relief Martin talked volubly, with a fluency that was almost light-hearted

'The All Clear went at twenty past twelve. It's two o'clock now.'

'I know. You see, it was like this . . .'

The man in civilian dress had been studying Martin in silence. He drew near in order to get a better view of him.

'Bring him along', he said to the policemen.

Martin at once protested and, since he desired nothing more than to spend the night at the police station, had the presence of mind to be insolent. The policemen took up their position on either side of him, pounding his ribs with short, sharp blows of their elbows, delivered with their hands on their hips. The group set off through the darkness down the Rue Pigalle. From a night resort, all windows masked, there escaped a scarcely audible trickle of music.

'You've no right to pick me up like this,' Martin said. 'You'll be hearing from me, coppers or no coppers.'

The policemen retorted with further digs of the elbow, hard and shrewdly aimed. Martin saw himself assured of a haven until the morrow, where he would be sheltered from the silence, the loneliness, the eyes of his concierge and his friends. Feeling more free already, he thought of the man who had died at his hands, and his heart began to swell with feelings of regret and friendship and heavy sweet remorse.

The party emerged on to another crossroad open to the moonlight. The police inspector, who had been walking a few paces ahead of them, paused where the light was brightest and signalled to the others to stop. Martin was suddenly terrified by the thought that they were going to let him go. This place was as deserted and as threatening as the Place Pigalle. The inspector carried a flat, rectangular package, wrapped in newspaper. Hampered by his thick woollen

gloves he unwrapped it with a clumsy and violent haste, as though he were suddenly in the grip of an overwhelming impatience.

'Did you know a painter named Gilouin?'

'No', answered Martin.

The inspector thrust a sketch-book bound in grey linen beneath his nose. It was open at a place marked by a slip of newspaper. Martin saw the portrait and the date.

'Why did you kill him?'

Martin did not answer. His silence was dreadfully prolonged. The inspector and the two constables were watching him, on tenterhooks, awaiting the moment when it would amount to a confession. Martin, for his part, had no share in this tension. He had only a sense of relief at seeing his destiny conform to his new face, as reflected in the mirror of his daily world. The loneliness and silence of the streets, which he had encountered so often in the course of his nocturnal excursions, held no more terrors for him. He had nothing more to fear.

'Why did you kill him?' repeated the inspector in a gentler voice.

This time Martin sought honestly for an adequate reply, taking time for thought. There had been the departure of Mariette, the strange behaviour of Grandgil, his little eyes that shone with irony, the series of mysterious contradictions finally explained in an exasperating and unexpected way, and the air-raid warning. A bundle of small matters, rather puerile vexations. The flavour of a bad day. And there had also been the Turkish soldier. At an age when boys of good family are still at school he had been sent to the assault of a peninsula with a knife in his hand. But all that was his advocate's business. Martin answered simply, in a quiet voice:

'You can't always help yourself, can you?'

One of the policemen began to laugh, but seeing the others still with grave faces he fell silent in embarrassment. Since



they were not far from the station, the inspector thought it unnecessary to handcuff the prisoner. The two constables took him each by one arm. The group moved on again, passing into the shadow. Martin suddenly remembered that he had forgotten to post the envelope containing the five thousand francs addressed to Jamblier. It was still in his overcoat pocket. He got it out and let it fall to the ground behind him without attracting the notice of his escort. Tomorrow morning someone would find it and put it in a letter-box. Martin had no misgivings as to the honesty of that unknown passer-by. Never had he had such absolute faith in the virtue of his fellow-men.